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Europeanisation of the populist far-right – the political crisis of the EU and the emergence of a populist far-right European project

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ABSTRACT

This article traces contradictory developments in the Europeanisation of the populist far right. Based on state and hegemony theory, it analyses the development of a European far-right project between 2019 and 2024. Five events are central to this analysis: the 2019 European elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Conference on the Future of Europe, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the European Elections 2025. During this period, a European far-right project developed based on the idea of a 'true Europe'. However, this was not a linear process but was characterized by many contradictions and differences within the far-right. This suggests that the European scale plays a much more important role and requires greater attention in research.

KEYWORDS

European integration; the far-right; populism; Europeanisation

Introduction – the Europeanisation of the far right

Since the 2019 European elections, the political landscape in Europe has changed significantly. In the far-right spectrum, processes that have been looming since Brexit have accelerated and multiplied in the wake of the 2019 elections. Although Brexit came as a shock to the EU and initially led to euphoria among the far-right and populist radical right parties¹ (PRRPs), it did not lead to further exit campaigns (van Kessel et al., 2020). Rather, parties such as the Rassemblement National (RN, formerly the Front National) changed their position towards the EU and the euro. This post-Brexit tendency has often been understood as a transition from hard to soft Euroscepticism (McMahon, 2022), or as a redefinition of the far-right's relationship to European integration, now accepting 'the logic of European interdependence' and a chance to 'endogenize nationalism within the EU'. (Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024, p. 341). However, both approaches show the limitations of the terminology of Euroscepticism. Roch criticize that the categories of hard and soft Euroscepticism are too rigid to capture the contradictions of positioning within far-right parties (Roch, 2024), which is why the term equivocal Euroscepticism has been proposed (Heinisch et al., 2021). It refers to analyses of far-right parties that take the acceptance of various, sometimes even contradictory, policy positions into account and understand this as strategic or programmatic ambivalence (Havertz, 2020; Ptak, 2018). Given the euro ambivalence (Lorimer, 2020) of the PRRPs, a strict categorization into soft and hard euroscepticism proves inadequate. On the one hand, populist internationalists seek European cooperation because it can yield domestic benefits (McDonnell & Werner, 2019). On the other hand, they simultaneously develop their own European imagination, constructing a pre-political Europe beyond the EU. This ambivalence towards the EU also points to the hidden history of a Euro-nationalism that developed alongside the genuine nationalism of the PRRP (Startin & Brack, 2016). This assumption is supported by recent research on the European concepts of the PRRP, and on the Europeanisation of far-right extra-parliamentary movements such as the Identitarian Movement (Nissen, 2022; Volk, 2019). Building on this research, the present article assumes that the concept of Euroscepticism frames the relationship of the PRRPs to the EU too narrowly and is unable to capture many contradictions and ambivalences, since this relationship is dichotomized at its core as nationalism vs. European integration. Rather, far-right Europeanism must be understood as a redefinition of the strategic-populist dichotomy of people versus elite within the paradigm of European nativism. The Europeanisation of the PRRPs and the development of a European Nativism must

be analysed in the context of the EU's political crisis and the crisis-driven re-ordering of the scales of political arenas in Europe.

The analysis will be conducted in four steps. First, the concept of *project*, which is taken from critical European studies, will be theoretically grounded. Second, the crisis of the EU will be described as the social context for the Europeanisation of the far-right project. Third, the process of its development will be analysed based on five events: the 2019 European elections, the Covid pandemic, the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 and the 2024 European elections. These events represent shifts, contradictions and reorientations of the far-right project. Fourth, the central elements of the European imaginary are identified. The rationality and structure of this imaginary form a deep-seated commonality between the various actors of the far-right project that transcends contradictions.

The basic material for the analysis consists of press reports, speeches made during the election campaign 2019 and in the European Parliament (EP) between 2019 and 2024, manifestos and (party) statements. Inspired by a hegemonic theory adaptation of critical discourse analysis (Caterina, 2018) and ideology-critical considerations, on the production of knowledge about society (Knappertsbusch, 2021; Resch & Steinert, 2009) the specificity of the far-right European imaginary is elaborated, which is seen as an expression of a strategy to rearticulate the populist opposition between the people and the elite on a European scale. The aim of this analysis is to determine the specific far-right way of adapting to and helping to shape the European re-ordering of the political space through forming its own European project.

Theoretical considerations – the concept of *Projects*

Recent reflections on the conceptual categorization of the different milieus of the far-right show that an overly strict conceptual separation between an 'illiberal-democratic' and an 'extremist anti-democratic' right obscures their growing connections (Pirro, 2023). It is therefore useful to focus research on the unifying elements using 'far-right' as an umbrella term. Thus, we must understand PRRP and their public engagement as part of larger far-right networks, which are crucial to their ideological and strategic orientations (McMahon, 2022; Pirro, 2023). Furthermore, links between liberalism and authoritarianism and the importance of adopting far-right positions in elite discourse can be obscured by narrowing the concept of populism, even though these factors account for a significant part of the electoral success of PRRP (May & Czymara, 2023; Mondon, 2024). The ideological and strategic approaches of PRRP must always be situated in a complex context of political and economic conditions, social discourses, crisis dynamics, civil society developments, and thus in social power relations. To grasp this complexity and, above all, to avoid conceptual limitations, the concept of the hegemonic project has been applied to the PRRP (Eicker, 2024; Fedders, 2016; Friedrich, 2022).

The concept of 'hegemony project' originated in neogramscian and state-theoretical approaches and was initially used to derive various projects of European integration from political conflicts or to examine concrete political projects such as the European Monetary Union (Apeldoorn, 2000; Bieling & Steinhilber, 2000; Kannankulam & Georgi, 2012). The concept aims at recognizing bundles of strategies applied by actors who are not necessarily connected to each other in specific political conflicts, but who share a similar rationality and at least implicitly contain a vision of a general social, societal and political development (Buckel et al., 2014, pp. 45–51; Wissel, 2015, pp. 60–66; Kannankulam & Georgi, 2012, pp. 34–36). It provides a differentiated perspective on political conflicts by emphasizing the articulation and formation of social interests in the conflict itself, rather than the formation of conflicting parties based on previously assumed objective class interests. This allows to differentiate between actors, interests and strategies (Kannankulam & Georgi, 2012, p. 20). Thus, the aim is to analyse how different actor constellations struggle to generalize their interests both within their own class and over subaltern class factions. Hegemony denotes a form of domination under the conditions of the capitalist mode of production that is characterized by a certain relationship between coercion and consent, Consent means at least passive acceptance of the fundamental prevailing order. The organization of this consent involves a 'dynamic of universalisation' of the particular interests of a class faction, 'which takes into account and incorporates certain elements of subaltern consciousness, everyday experiences, historically developed ideologies and material needs.' (Opratko, 2012, p. 43) Hegemony projects can be understood as forms of such universalization, as an aggregation of strategies and rationalities of different class factions in a long-term project for the future In organizing

such a universalization, organic intellectuals (cf. Gramsci, 2012, p. 1532) play an important role by synthesizing the similar rationality of different ideas and interests into a social vision, thus articulating the imagination of a project for the future development of society in a representative way. By analysing the statements of the actors and their ideas, the underlying imaginaries and rationalities can be worked out in an ideology-critical way, and thus different hegemony projects in areas of social conflict can be identified. However, a research gap appears. Although the possibility of non – or anti-hegemonic political practices is acknowledged, it is not systematically investigated (Buckel et al., 2014, pp. 51–53).

If we broaden our perspective, we must include the possibility of non-hegemonic practices. Historically, fascism was such a project of non-hegemonic practices, which also aimed at fundamental changes in the meaning of concepts and the practices associated with them, as Kirchheimer demonstrated using the example of changes in political compromise (Kirchheimer, 1941). Fascism emerged during a profound crisis of hegemony (Riley, 2019), to which it responded with a project of destruction. Even at the level of ideology, fascism did not develop a relatively coherent structure but declared contradictory and irrational fragments of everyday mind to universal truths and asserted an eternal human nature (Gramsci, 2012, p. 1041). Through reinforcement of affects and resentments while redefining social generality in some kind of immediate coercive relations of the state to the individual, its political form was no longer constituted in the form of hegemony. According to Poulantzas, the fascist exceptional state was characterized by a fundamental weakening of the relative autonomy of the ideological state apparatuses, changes in the political representation of social forces in forms of a immediacy, and the specific form of plebiscitarian legitimacy, depending on the specific ideology of ‘popular sovereignty (Poulantzas, 1979, p. 327). ‘The fascist state is characterized by the permanent mobilization of the masses.’ (Poulantzas, 1979, p. 331) Taking stock of these considerations, using the term hegemony project for the far-right right tends to overemphasize practices of hegemony such as mediation of different (class) interests in synthesizing a European project and to underestimate the non-hegemonic forms of far-right politics, structured by politics of immediacy and a permanent mobilization of affects, politics that are aimed at fragmentation and not synthesis or a universalization through coercion, not compromise. This doesn’t mean, that the far-right is not also acting in modes of hegemony, or organizing in some respect counter-hegemony through parliamentary work, but I suggest to grasp its specific authoritarian character to understand it not as a hegemony project but a project sui generis.. However, the understanding of the formation of political projects as the result of social struggles in and around the arenas of the state, also help to analyse the far-right project, which emerges in struggles over the handling of the crisis of European integration and particularly struggles over the future of the EU. It has adapted to the Europeanisation of politics and the emergence of a European apparatus ensemble and aims to create new links between spatial scales, with the European scale taking on a heightened significance. Through the construction of a European nativism, a mythical European immediacy is created that opposes the EU and points to the fundamentally non-hegemonic character of the project.

Crisis of the EU, crisis of the future of Europe

The context for the development of a far-right European project with its own rationalities and imaginaries is the crisis of European integration and how it has been handled politically since 2008 (cf. Wissel, 2019). The reconfiguration of European power relations in the wake of this crisis is also reflected in a shift in the balance of political power and the fragmentation of social forces (Martin & Wissel, 2015). EU’s handling of the 2008 crisis and beyond ensured the continuation of neoliberal policies, while they were simultaneously depoliticized (Chamayou, 2020, p. 310) through enshrining particularly fiscal and monetary policies in the treaties (Ryner, 2015). This led to cracks in the neoliberal hegemony project and in the power bloc, i.e. in the alliances within the ruling class factions. Depoliticization led to a weakening of democratic opportunities for participation and a shift in the social balance of power, which in turn supported the narrowing of opportunities for political action. The result was a profound crisis of hegemony (Oberndorfer, 2020) or legitimacy (Schmidt, 2020). A crisis of hegemony is understood as a blockage in the processing of political contradictions, because no faction, no hegemony project can achieve a hegemonic position. The paths of alternative development are increasingly blocked. Hence, crises of legitimacy arise from the disruption of both participation and influence on decisions (input legitimacy) and participation in decision-making processes (output legitimacy). Social forces that were previously organized in relatively stable projects begin to reorient themselves,

which can lead to processes of disintegration, expressed in far-reaching changes in party systems and internal transformations of parties (Amable & Palombarini, 2018). These developments indicate that the formation of hegemony projects has become increasingly difficult and that power constellations have become somewhat fluid. The processes of mutual reinforcement of multiple crisis elements can be summarized as follows: On the one hand, economic policies in particular are being forced into a very fixed framework that leaves little room for manoeuvre; on the other hand, different crises (economic crises, climate crises, Covid crises, etc.) are overlapping and reinforcing each other, leading to the necessity of reacting to new crises at short notice, while the crisis process is by no means resolved elsewhere. This can result in perpetuating particular crises by normalizing them as the need for action is urging elsewhere (Klauke, 2022). Such a constellation can be used to strategically shift the capacity to act from one crisis-ridden policy area to another, while conflicts intensify. Thus, the contradiction between short-term management and long-term solutions grows (Vobruba, 2015, p. 221). Due to these developments, the EU lost the persuasiveness of its unifying narrative, as the 'old narrative of 'peace and prosperity' [...] has been replaced by a cost-benefit view of European integration' (Brasche, 2017, p. 337), that is increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of short-term solutions. This is exacerbating tensions within the EU and gives rise to conflicts over the European project with the crisis of European imaginaries that provide legitimation, integration itself comes under pressure, and crises and conflicts in single policy areas become, at least implicitly, struggles for the future of a European generality.

Trajectories of the far-right project

As the crisis is characterized by the crumbling of once unquestioned institutions and ideas, it opens new battlegrounds for fundamental challenging of those institutions and ideas. The following sections will reconstruct the process of forming a European far-right project in five steps throughout the 2019 European elections, the Covid-Pandemic, the Conference on the Future of Europe, the 2022 Russian attacks on Ukraine and the 2024 European elections. These events are considered as decisive moments, as they are representing points of restructuring the relations and contradictions within the far-right project. This will show its development through its inner contradictions as well as its situation in deeper crisis-driven transformations on a European scale.

The 2019 European elections

The crisis of European integration and of the European narrative of the future has led to a situation in which European integration itself is increasingly being called into question. This was intensified by the shock of the Brexit vote in 2016, which briefly led to a kind of euphoria among PRRP (van Kessel et al., 2020). However, it quickly became clear that leaving the EU would entail many hardships and that exit plans had too little popular support, leading to a realignment of many PRRPs ahead of the 2019 European elections. This marks an important milestone in the development of a European far-right project. Drastic changes in the balance of power in Europe were already emerging before the elections. Besides Brexit, the establishment of PRRPs across Europe was sidelined by a historical weakness of social democratic and liberal conservative parties. Specifically, the previous absolute majority of the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) and the European Peoples Party (EPP) had crumbled, and the groups to the right of the EPP became stronger. They hoped to break the cordon sanitaire that had kept PRRPs out of offices and important positions in the EP ever since (Rettig, 2020). The crisis of the EU, and particularly the crisis of the European narrative of the future, combined with the EU-reorientation of important PRRP, led to an intensified debate on Europe and the EU across the entire far-right spectrum.

The foreseeable changes in the EP would also allow for a recomposing of the far-right groups. It was clear that the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EfDD) group would disband after the election, since the largest group consisted of UKIP members who would leave the Parliament when Brexit was implemented. Another important change resulted from the emerging strength of the AfD and its reorientation in the EP. The AfD first joined the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) faction in 2014 under then-party leader Lucke. This changed after Lucke's resignation, when Lucke and other former AfD members of parliament remained in the ECR, while Jörg Meuthen joined the EfDD, as did Beatrix von Storch, while

Markus Pretzell was expelled from the ECR and joined the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group. This led to a situation in which the former and actual AfD parliamentarians were spread across all three far-right factions, and Jörg Meuthen was the only remaining AfD member before the 2019 elections. Hence it was clear that a larger AfD delegation would enter the EP and would need a new parliamentary group. At the same time, the League under Matteo Salvini was able to celebrate unexpected successes in Italy and form a government with the Five Star Movement in 2018.

Furthermore, European conservatism is being shaken in several dimensions. In France for instance the conservative party crumbled, while Macron's *La République En Marche* has emerged as a new type of party in the bourgeois spectrum (Amable & Palombarini, 2018). On the European scale, a major conflict arose in the EPP with Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz*, because of the EPP's support for the Commission's action taken against Hungary's rule of law violations and dismantling of academic freedom as in the case of the Central European University (Bohle et al., 2024; Enyedi, 2018). In 2018, Orbán threatened to establish a new far-right faction in the EP, saying 'it would be easy to create, a new formation of like-minded Central European parties – or even a pan-European anti-immigration formation.' (Orbán, 2018)

All these conflicts represent cracks in the power bloc (Kannankulam, 2019) and are expressions of the crisis of hegemony that leads to a reorientation of the political milieu and enables new alliances, and particularly the mainstreaming of far-right ideology. This was accompanied by shifts within the European far-right. With the 2019 election, the Front National's central position in the far-right faction began to crumble (Stöss, 2019). Although Le Pen started the 2019 European election campaign – she hosted an ENF meeting in Nice on May 1, 2018 – the internal balance of power initially shifted towards the League. The meeting in Nice was not initially aimed at forming a new faction, but according to Le Pen it should lay the basis for 'getting a majority for a different Europe' (quoted from: *Tages-Anzeiger* 2.5.2018). However, as the campaign progressed, the focus shifted more to the League and Matteo Salvini, who traveled around Europe trying to find allies for a single large far-right faction. He met with Orbán early on to negotiate cooperation. The joint press conference after the meeting was described by the international press as an 'anti-migrant manifesto' (Boccatto, 2018) and the formation of an 'anti-migrant front' (Tondo, 2018). The 'future of Europe' here depends primarily on developing 'security' through anti-migration measures and in uniting the far-right against the impending EU sanctions against Hungary (Orbán, 2018b). This was already an indication of Orbán's growing influence, although at the time he was still trying to push the EPP to the right, while Salvini flirted with the idea of becoming Commission President himself (dpa, 2018).

The Covid pandemic

Shortly after the European elections, the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in the spring of 2020. This affected far-right activities and stalled the development of the European far-right project. PRRP failed to formulate a coherent response to the pandemic (Camus, 2021, p. 124f.). Europe as an issue became less important, not least because PRRP also became entangled in contradictions within the nation-state, and new actors entered the political stage.

The contradictions brought about by the Covid crisis can be clearly seen in the example of the AfD. With the collapse of the global economy (Tooze, 2021), 'globalization' seemed to have suffered a serious setback. However, the sudden increase in the importance of the nation-state scale (which was relativized in the first year of the pandemic) did not necessarily lead to a strengthening of PRRPs (Camus, 2021, p. 125). Initially, the measures taken by the federal German government were welcomed by the AfD. However, this position was already wavering at the beginning, and within a month the AfD reversed their position. Now Alexander Gauland complained that the government was trying to install the 'state as guardian' (Gauland, 2020, p. 19301) and declared the lockdown to be wrong. This turnaround was fueled by the emerging movement of Covid-deniers, which brought a diffuse alliance of regressive rebelliousness onto the streets (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022).

PRRP in other EU countries also had problems adapting to the pandemic. The parties of the ID faction could not find a common position on how the EU should deal with the pandemic. In fact, contradictions in attitudes towards the EU and aid programs became more apparent than before. Differences were particularly evident in the debate on the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Some (e.g. the AfD and Scandinavian PRRP) rejected the EU's first-ever debt assumption from a neoliberal position, as they did not want to see

austerity and the debt brake softened. The Lega, until then the main party of the ID faction, opposed the EU measures mainly out of fear that the EU could impose new sanctions if the aid programs were implemented. This supposedly social position was linked to the rejection of climate protection programs. For example, Lega MEP Marco Campomenosi said that he did not want ‘to finance the production of electric scooters in China by cutting pensions in Italy’ (EP, 2020). Thus, cracks appeared in the far-right project in the first phase of the Covid crisis. Additionally, the far-right discourse shifted from the anti-immigrant ‘Great Replacement’-Myth to the conspiracy-narrative of a ‘Great Reset’, understood here as the planned reconstruction of Europe according to the will of a conspiratorial elite that wants to deindustrialize and de-homogenise Europe, and destroy ‘the peoples’ (Keil, 2021). The policy response to the virus was linked to other EU policy proposals in order to create common ground for the disparate far-right groups by constructing a new enemy. In particular, the European Green Deal, to which Campomenosi alludes, was imagined as part of a ‘Great Reset’ alongside the Covid measures² This myth has proven to be compatible across the boundaries of the different far-right movements. With the far-right European project showing cracks, there was a broadening of the base of the far-right.

Conference for the future of Europe

To address the crisis of legitimacy, the Commission initiated the Conference on the Future of Europe, which was tasked with developing a new vision for Europe with the involvement of EU citizens. (Abels et al., 2022; Plottka, 2020). The conference opened in May 2021 and consisted of four thematically structured forums. In these, randomly selected EU citizens developed proposals for specific policy challenges. The plenary session, which included representatives of the EU institutions, produced a catalogue of 49 recommendations and over 300 individual proposals (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022). Although the question of the legal consequences of these recommendations remains controversial, the conference can be understood in terms of hegemony theory as an attempt to strengthen European civil society. While it was ignored by the extra-parliamentary right, it offered PRRP an opportunity to renew their European ambitions. PRRP rejected to participate in the conference, but initiated two meetings of in Warsaw and Madrid, to foster European cooperation. Both times, declarations were adopted in the context of the debate on the future of Europe. The ‘Declaration on the Future of Europe’, contrasting the EU with a ‘true Europe’, was signed by 16 PRRP. They also used this forum to attack the conference as undemocratic and to highlight themselves as only real opposition, describing the conference as a ‘show’ or ‘theater’ (Annemans, 2022), thus endowing the EU with attributes of the artificial, which supposedly corrodes the true, traditional, genuine and original Europe. Furthermore, citizen participation is claimed to be anti-democratic (ID Group 2022).

These examples show two things: first, the EU’s attempts to address its legitimacy crisis through new deliberative procedures such as citizens’ forums are attacked as anti-democratic, thereby exacerbating the EU’s legitimacy crisis. Second, the claim, as formulated in the declaration mentioned above, that the EU is a superstate run by globalist, pro-Muslim elites and socialists combines several enemy images. Without a more concrete definition of what the ‘true Europe’ is, the far-right tries to formulate a European agenda through racism, anti-Semitism and a ‘cult of immediacy’ (Frankenberg, 2020, p. 255), appearing as rejection of citizens forums and deliberative democratic procedures tested in the conference. The opposition to participatory democracy and an imagined EU superstate controlled by globalist elites using migration to oppress the European peoples, which was formulated in the course of the conference, once again formed the basis for a European far-right project.

The Russian attacks on Ukraine

As Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine began, attitudes towards Russia once again revealed deep divisions in the far-right spectrum. (Wondreys, 2025). In the debates in the EU Parliament, two factions have emerged on the question of relations with Russia, mainly the ECR on the one hand and the Patriots for Europe (Pfe) and Europe of sovereign Nations (ESN) on the other. As can be seen from the statements made in two debates in 2023 and after the 2024 elections on Ukraine/Russia, the contradictions have remained the same, but the different positions have been redistributed. In 2023, the ID faction presented a mixed picture. In the debate on April 19, 2023, on the abduction of Ukrainian children to Russia and

the ICC arrest warrant against Putin, both ID member Jaak Madison (then EKRE) and Lega politician Anna Bonfrisco chose words critical of Russia, while her colleague Thierry Mariani wanted to reinterpret the abduction of Ukrainian children as an evacuation, in line with Russian propaganda (EP, 2023). The position of the League MEPs also indicates that there are contradictions within the parties on this issue, which could consist of strategic adjustments to EU policies. During the 2019 European election campaign, Gianluca Savoini – then Matteo Salvini’s right-hand – unequivocally supported Europe’s orientation towards Russia and advocated the creation of a Eurasian space (Savoini, 2018). After the Election 2024, the opposing positions have largely been distributed between the pro-Russian PfE and ESN on the one side and the more transatlantic-oriented ECR on the other. This can be illustrated by the debate over the EU’s financial and military support for Ukraine. ECR members, such as Adam Bielan, call for continued support for Ukraine in all respects: ‘The European Union, its Member States and our partners, with NATO continuing to take the lead, must renew and strengthen their commitment to support the Ukrainian war effort and to stand with the aggressed rather than the aggressor’ (EP, 2024b). Both the PfE and the ESN rejected this transatlantic orientation, trying instead to present themselves as advocates of peace and call for diplomatic efforts (e.g. Tamas Deutsch, *ibid.*). They refer to Orbán as an example, who began the Hungarian presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2024 with an unannounced trip to Russia to present himself as a peace diplomat. Orbán’s approach, which can be interpreted as no less than an attack on the EU’s Ukraine policy, was also well received by the extra-parliamentary right. Benedikt Kaiser, a central figure of the European New Right, attested to Orbán’s ‘radical realism,’ which is oriented toward ‘peacekeeping and restoration’ (Kaiser, 2024, p. 60). In this context, a strategy appears that can be interpreted as an attempt to connect to the EU’s peace narrative and to revive it in a reversal. The reversal consists in presenting the far-right as the true representatives of European values, while the representatives of the EU no longer represent them. For example, the Lega deputy and PfE member Roberto Vanacci said to the then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell: ‘[...] and let those who really want peace and those who want to save the European Union and the values on which it is founded – which you and Commissioner Borrell have probably forgotten – work’ (EP, 2024a). These opposing positions appear in this conflict as two different conceptions of Europe: One that is transatlantic and pro-Western, and one pro-Russian that rejects the West. These opposing geopolitical positions are the result of two opposing European strategies, each of which seeks to expand and consolidate power in the EU. It is a strategic conflict that also runs through the extra-parliamentary far-right, oscillating between a ‘realpolitik’ and a maximalist position, between the expansion of power through participation in government institutions and a disruptive power through strategies of negation. The first strategy is mainly associated with the Italian Prime Minister Meloni, while Martin Sellner has emphasized his desire to ‘prevent the ‘Melonization’ of patriotic Europe’ (Sellner, 2023).

On the road to the 2024 European elections: common ground and the exit-contradiction

Despite these strategic differences, common ground within the far-right camps can be found. In the debate on ‘Foreign influence operations and hybrid attacks: the need to strengthen the EU’s resilience and internal security’ (EP, 2024b), which negotiated measures that the Commission had primarily developed ‘against Russia’s hybrid activities’ (Didier Reynders: EP, 2024b), the various far-right factions aligned themselves. MEPs from the ECR, PfE and ESN reinterpreted hybrid warfare in two ways: first, they accused the EU of waging hybrid warfare in collaboration with left-wing groups and NGOs or European left-liberal elites, and second, they claimed that migration is a form of hybrid warfare. Fidesz/PfE member László András lamented the alleged foreign interference by American leftist with EU support in the Hungarian election campaign, and funding for the Hungarian left and NGOs, ECR member Beata Szydło claimed that the ‘left-liberal elites’ ‘also dictate certain norms to the public and impose a narrative’ (EP, 2024b). Petar Volgin (ESN) explained that the EU elites themselves spread disinformation to prevent criticism of the EU: ‘All in all, any reasonable voice in Europe is defined as a hybrid attack. Any meaningful criticism of the policies imposed by Brussels is automatically dismissed as disinformation’ (EP, 2024b). Second, speakers from two far-right factions highlighted migration movements as hybrid warfare: ‘It is time to take seriously the dangers of hybrid warfare and the misuse of migration in order to protect our borders and ensure the security of our territory.’ (Nikola Bartůšek (PfE) EP, 2024b) Ivaylo Valchev (ECR) explained that hybrid attacks in

Europe fall on fertile ground because EU policies promote ‘marginalized sexual minorities’ and ‘have been pushing for uncontrolled access of migrants for 9 years’. At the same time, there are differences in the alleged perpetrators: it is either the EU itself or Russia, which has ‘sent masses of instrumentalized migrants to our borders’ (Sebastian Tynkkynen (ECR), EP, 2024b). However, the idea of a Europe under attack by EU elites and by migratory movements can be found in all far-right groups, despite their opposing positions on Russia.

A second central contradiction is the question of leaving the EU. In particular, the conflict between Le Pen and the AfD in the run-up to the 2024 European elections has shown fundamental strategic differences. In the wake of the 2021 federal elections in Germany, the AfD renegotiated its relationship with the EU. The demand for a Dexit was included in the party’s federal election manifesto (AfD, 2021, p. 30), which did not go down well with the other PRRPs in Europe (Jesse, 2021, p. 358). As a result, the AfD was not invited to the meetings in Warsaw in 2021 and Madrid in 2022. However, at the party conference in Magdeburg in 2023, where the European election program was adopted, Dexit was replaced by the demand for ‘reestablishing a European economic and interest community’ (AfD, 2024, p. 10). In addition, the party conference decided to join the European party Identity and Democracy, but the contradiction between European cooperation and the demand for Dexit remained virulent and was also strategically exploited by the party leader (Chazan, 2024). The continued flirtation with a Dexit led to the ID faction’s 2024 European election campaign being conducted without the AfD. In September 2023, the first foundations for the 2024 European election campaign were laid at a meeting between Marine Le Pen (RN) and Matteo Salvini (Lega). Both agreed that the ‘peoples’ and ‘identity’ should be set against the ‘flood of migrants’ (Le Monde 18/09/2023). In October 2023, members of the youth organizations of the ID parties met in Rome. Although the report on the meeting on the ID party website does not mention the Young Alternative, it was represented³ (ID-Party, 2023a). A leading AfD representative, Tino Chrupalla, was also present at a meeting in Lisbon in November 2023 (ID-Party, 2023b) and at the campaign launch in Florence in early December 2023. However, relations with Marine Le Pen came under additional strain in January 2024. After journalists investigated a meeting between AfD – and CDU-members and actors from the extra-parliamentary far right, at which deportation plans based on ethnic categorizations were discussed under the keyword ‘remigration’ (Correctiv, 2024), Le Pen threatened to end cooperation in the ID group in the EP (Baccini, 2024). The conflict within the ID group was further aggravated by allegations that Petr Bystron and Maximilian Krah, the AfD’s top candidates for the European elections 2024, had accepted funds from Russian actors. In addition, one of Krah’s associates was arrested on suspicion of spying for China. Since such events could also lead to poorer election results and fewer opportunities for Le Pen to gain power, the RN distanced itself from the AfD. After the European elections, a decision would be made on whether cooperation in a parliamentary group could continue (Griera, 2024). The last and most important phase of the election campaign began with a rally in Rome at the end of March 2024 without the AfD (Beise, 2024). While the former ID factions formed Patriots for Europe (PFE) with Fidesz, the AfD joined smaller far-right parties to form the ESN faction. However, the conflict over leaving the EU is not so much a conflict of divergent European visions, but rather a conflict of strategies. The ambivalences that emerged during the election campaign have primarily reached their strategic limits.

European imaginaries

Since the euro crisis, the far right has been working on European cooperation and ideology. These attempts have involved debates on European imaginaries, which can serve as a common denominator and as a means of countering the crisis of the mainstream narrative of Europe with an imaginary that has its own rationality. These European imaginaries must not be reduced to terms such as Euroscepticism or sovereignism, because both lead to an overly broad dichotomy between the national and the European, concealing the far-right’s Europeanism. The far-right’s European imaginary is to be understood in the context of the crisis of the EU and in the struggles for a new future narrative of the EU. Current research mainly identifies different models of Europe, which are represented by different parties and spectrums: Europe of nations, European nation, European empire, Eurasia or Europe of regions (Virchow, 2017). By resorting to these models, the idea of a Europe of nations/fatherlands is often associated with the PRRP, without taking a closer look at the exact statements on Europe. An analysis of various speeches (election campaign 2019 and group-meetings thereafter) and manifestos (2019-2025) provides a more precise picture of the imaginaries of Europe. These are first

structured by the construction of a 'true Europe' as opposed to the EU. For example, the Antwerp Declaration of the ID Party, 2022 states: 'The ID Party advocates a sharp distinction between Europe and the European Union. The European Union and its current strategy are increasingly the antithesis of Europe as a continent and as a historical unit of civilization, complementary to the national identity of the different peoples.' (ID Party, 2022, p. 2). The EU as the antithesis of Europe provides the basic structure for an imagined Europe that allows for strategic ambivalence and, above all, allows the EU to be shaped as an enemy. A central element of this is a reversal of the narrative of European integration as inherently progressive, wealth-creating, and peace-preserving (Manners & Murray, 2016), which over time has been associated with a founding myth of the EU that negatively constructed a European identity out of fascism and Auschwitz (Della Sala, 2018; Keil, 2019). The narrative of the EU as the antithesis of historical fascism/totalitarianism is reversed in the far-right European imaginary. The EU as a totalitarian and socialist institution destroying the true Europe is an important ideogeme for both parties and extra-parliamentary far-right movements (Volk, 2023). For Instance: 'The EU is becoming more and more a tool of radical forces that want to carry out a cultural, religious transformation and ultimately a nationless construction of Europe, aiming at the creation of a European superstate, the destruction or abolition of European tradition, the transformation of basic social institutions and moral principles.' (Declaration, 2021). In a statement after a meeting of the PRRPs in Madrid in early 2022, it was said: 'We will confront everything that advocates a European Union that is alien to its history and that, detached from reality, leads to demographic suicide and social transformation.' (Madrid Summit, 2022) and the leader of the Spanish Vox said: 'We are the ones who defend Europe, and to defend Europe is to say that we will not allow the flag of the hammer and sickle to be raised, nor the flag of the crescent, nor the dark and stateless flag of the globalist elites.' (quoted in La Gaceta 29.1. 2022) And during a PöF group meeting in February 2025, Estonian MEP Martin Helme said: 'We patriots must act quickly, with speed, courage and determination to irreversibly destroy the structures of the extreme left and liberal fascists who have built and destroyed our identity and our heritage, our prosperity and our security, so that they could damage our Christian civilization and replace it with their sick satanic utopia' (PöF, 2025).

Three central negative definitions of the 'true Europe' can be identified from this: the EU and its representatives are marked as totalitarian socialist or fascist 'anti-Europeans' (Meuthen, 2019) who, secondly, want to destroy the European heritage and European civilization to establish a globalist superstate. The 'true Europe', on the other hand, is implied by terms such as 'heritage', 'tradition' or 'family values'. This evokes an image of European history that contains two elements: one that is timeless and one that concerns an interpretation of the history of integration after 1945. The timeless element is characterized by the invocation of European traditions and heritage. Central to this are ethnic homogeneity, the image of the heterosexual nuclear family, and sometimes the Christian or Judeo-Christian heritage, thus creating a supranational structure that serves as the basis for European cooperation. At the same time, this creates a mythical Europe, rooted in fascist traditions. An example of this is a speech by Björn Höcke (AfD) at a meeting of the AfD in 2018, which was held under the motto 'The True Europe'. There, Höcke stated that a new European myth, a 'rebirth' of Europe (Höcke, 2018), could only be created through struggle: 'This struggle of the Europeans for self-determination and the preservation of their own identity will create a new European myth.' (Ibid.) The EU is described as 'an agency for the dissolution of European culture and the peoples that support this European culture' (Höcke, 2018), getting to the fascist core of the ideologies outlined above. Central to the European imaginary is the assertion of the EU as a rupture with Europe, as the destruction of all traditions by dark forces that can only be countered by decisive action. This motif of rupture, combined with the urgent need to reverse this rupture, underpins the construction of a far-right Europe that can serve as the basis for the unification and cooperation of the PRRP.

Conclusion: the European project of the far-right

It has been shown that in the political crisis of the EU PRRPs, the far right is developing a European project. Between 2019 and 2024, the development of this project within the PRRP/far right itself was conflictual and led to various constellations of cooperation and divisions. Throughout these conflicts, a European imaginary was developed that gave the far-right project a specific rationality. The development of a European far-right project shows the growing importance of the European scale for the structuring of political conflicts. In the

multiple crisis, the political space is being realigned, and the Europeanisation of the far-right is a fundamental part of this spatial reconfiguration. As the European project of the far-right is undemocratic in its core, it is not to be conceived as hegemony project – even it uses modes and institutions of hegemony –, but as project sui generis, and it seeks to gain Power in Europe. Democratic forces must develop European counter-responses.

Notes

1. I use the terms 'far right' and 'PPRP' as umbrella terms. 'Far right' refers to the heterogeneous extreme right and includes both extra-parliamentary and parliamentary actors, while 'PPRP' is used for parties to the right of conservative democratic parties. While there may be good reasons to draw precise dividing lines between the individual spectrums of the far right, the aim here is to develop a European project that transcends these dividing lines. Umbrella terms are useful for examining such grayzones (Pirro, 2023).
2. The imaginaries of the "Great Replacement" and the "Great Reset" share a similar conspiratorial-ideological dynamic, but differ somewhat in content, each representing its own strategic options. There has been controversy within the extra-parliamentary right over which of the two should be relied upon (see the discussion between far-right publicists/activists Martin Lichtmesz and Martin Sellner,; Lichtmesz/Sellner 2022).
3. As stated on the ID Party's Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/IDParty/posts/pfbid0cSMdi8gYWdsAvdzRvesxudGS1bgAJJ3T6kpCtUygeKVhmnBrfMwxcmW5pXNgqHr8l> (Last accessed: May 2, 2024).

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