

## Shadows over the European elections: three scenarios for EU-sceptical parties after the 2019 elections

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# SWP Comment

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## Shadows over the European Elections

Three Scenarios for EU-sceptical Parties after the 2019 Elections

*Nicolai von Ondarza and Felix Schenuit*

For a long time, the elections to the European Parliament (EP) were considered second-order elections with little political significance. But for the elections coming in 2019, they are turning into a decisive vote on the future of the European Union (EU) – not only because the EP has gained in importance, but especially because the European party system is undergoing fundamental change. Whereas established parties are losing support, right-wing populist and EU-sceptical parties have been growing across Europe. At the same time, there are increased efforts to unite the traditionally fragmented EU-sceptical forces into a collective movement. Even though there is no drastic increase expected in the number of EU-sceptical Members of European Parliament (MEPs) in the next parliamentary term, a reorganisation of the EU-sceptical spectrum could be the prelude to drastic changes in the political structure of the EU.

Traditionally, the European election year is regarded in Brussels as a “year of institutional transition”. From the start of the EP election campaigns in the spring, all the way up to the planned election of the new Commission, most of the year is devoted to this transition. Since the Treaty of Lisbon and the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle in 2014, the Presidency of the Commission is also directly linked to the elections. In addition, the Parliament has to approve the entire Commission, including the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. As the term limit of the European Council President also expires in November 2019, the entire leadership of the EU will be renewed.

At the level of the member states, however, the EP vote has so far been little more

than “second-order elections”, a series of simultaneous national votes that serve, above all, to send a message to the respective national governments. European political issues, on the other hand, have played only a minor role in previous EP election campaigns.

In 2019, however, the elections will take place under changed circumstances. After almost a decade of “crisis mode”, the future development of the EU is more controversial than ever. In March 2019, just eight weeks before the European elections, the United Kingdom will (probably) be the first member to leave the EU. As a result, the EP will, for the first time, be comprised of fewer MEPs than before: only 705 (see SWP Comment 10/2018). More than six months before the elections, candidates for the



*Spitzenkandidaten* are also pushing their way into the European public arena – even earlier than in the last elections.

At the same time, party systems across Europe are changing, albeit in varying degrees: In almost all elections since 2014, established parties have lost support, whereas the levels of fragmentation of party systems and the share of votes cast by EU-sceptical parties have grown in many cases. But liberal, pro-European forces also have a figurehead who is outside the existing party spectrum: French President Emmanuel Macron.

This makes the European elections a challenge for the EU's political system. On the one hand, the informal "grand coalition" between the Christian democratic and conservative European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D), which traditionally dominates the EU, must for the first time fear for its majority in the EP. On the other hand, Matteo Salvini, chairman of the Italian Lega Nord, and Stephen Bannon, right-wing populist agitator from the United States, have formulated the goal of uniting EU-sceptical parties and making them the largest faction in the EP.

### **European Parties: Between Alliances of Convenience and Genuine Communities of Interest**

In principle, European parties cannot be equated with national parties in terms of organisational character, unifying effect, and assertiveness. The Treaty on European Union (TEU) recognises parties at the European level that "contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union" (Article 10, TEU) and party financing structures have been established. However, European parties are not associations of citizens, but umbrella organisations of national parties. So far, they have been much weaker than their national member parties in terms of election campaigns, programmes, and finances. They are mainly visible

through the work of their EP political groups. Nevertheless, they fulfil four important functions in the EU's political system.

Firstly, they play a quite considerable role in reconciling the interests of national parties, and thus serve as an integration factor in European politics. For instance, the heads of state and government and/or party leaders of the large party families, such as the European Peoples Party (EPP) or the Party for European Socialists (PES), coordinate themselves before each European Council. There is, of course, also continuous coordination among the party groups in the EP, which often have close links to their national parties.

Secondly, the European political parties and their parliamentary groups are the main players for obtaining a majority in the EP, where there is no formal coalition, meaning that majorities must always be established on a case-by-case basis. Here, the party groups act like coherent political players. Despite their character as umbrella organisations, the major parties in particular have, with a few exceptions, succeeded in establishing parliamentary discipline in the EP instead of voting along national lines.

Thirdly, the parties are also becoming increasingly important for filling top EU positions. This has become clear in the strengthening of the EP through the Treaty of Lisbon and the *Spitzenkandidaten principle*, which was applied for the first time in 2014. Filling the posts of the European Council President and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy has also been linked to proportional representation of the parties.

Fourthly, European parties and joint parliamentary groups in the EP offer additional resources and legitimacy for national parties. Paradoxically, it was precisely the EU-sceptical parties that benefited the most from the EP's financial resources and the stage it provided. For instance, both Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen used their speeches in the European Parliament to gather social media attention, and used their legitimacy as MEPs to take part in televised debates, despite neither having

won a seat in their national Parliament at the time.

## EU-sceptical Parties in Strasbourg

The size and composition of the EU-sceptical camp, which is still the most fragmented one in the EP, are critical components in determining the composition and direction of the next European Parliament. In the summer of 2018, Stephen Bannon, former advisor to US President Donald Trump, announced building a movement to support right-wing populist parties across Europe. The declared goal is to form a large right-wing populist group with up to one-third of the MEPs in the 2019 European elections – thereby weakening the liberal European order from within.

Even though Bannon's proposal generated significant media attention, it should be noted that he jumped on an already moving train: Even before the European elections in 2014, the French National Front, the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), and the Italian Lega Nord had agreed on right-wing populist cooperation. After these four had performed worse than expected in the 2014 elections, they formed the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group the following year. In 2017, the leaders of the above parties, plus the German Alternative for Germany (AfD), met in Koblenz to support each other in the ongoing election campaigns and to push for policy changes in Europe. The objective is clearly stated: Salvini, party leader of Lega Nord, wants to create a European alliance to unite all EU-sceptical, national-conservative, and right-wing populist movements in Europe and to close the borders of the EU. It is a substantial challenge for the existing order in the Union.

So far, the spectrum of EU-sceptical parties in the European party system ranges from those that are moderately critical of the EU to the anti-EU parties of right-wing populists, and even those with a right-wing extremist character. These currents have

been represented at the European level for some time. Already in the first direct elections in 1979, a handful of Eurosceptic MEPs were elected to the EP, followed in 1984 by the then still clearly right-wing extremist Front National. Since the desired "national international" per se contains a contradiction, the parties concerned have long failed to establish a stable European group or party that can survive several legislative periods. In the 2014 European elections, the number of EU-sceptical MEPs rose to such an extent that they were able to form three separate parliamentary groups.

## EU-sceptical Factions and Parliamentarians

The largest of these three is the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. It currently has 73 members from 19 EU member states. In addition to its liberal economic orientation, the ECR originally followed a moderately EU-sceptical model. Accordingly, the majority of its members supported the membership of their countries in the EU, but they called for returning to a focus on the internal market and inter-governmental decision-making procedures. Since 2016 at the latest, however, the UK Conservatives, who have dominated the ECR, have been advocating for Brexit. At the same time, the group has expanded to include MEPs who are more sceptical about the EU. These include the Sweden Democrats, who are in favour of an EU exit referendum. However, the course of the Brexit negotiations have made it clear that Brexit also threatens the future of the ECR: With the Conservatives leaving the EP, the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party remains the only large party within the ECR.

Even more uncertain is the future of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group, the second smallest group in the EP, with 42 MEPs. It was formed after the 2014 elections and has no common electoral manifest. From the outset, it has been a mere alliance of convenience between the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Italian Five Star Movement. The

lowest common denominator has been the populist, EU-critical stance and the interest in parliamentary resources for political groups. With Brexit (most likely) happening at the end of March 2019, the 19 UKIP MEPs will exit the EP. This means that the EFDD would no longer be able to claim parliamentary group status, at least before the European elections in 2019, because a necessary criterion – namely bringing together at least 25 MEPs – would no longer be fulfilled. In any case, the second pillar of the EFDD – the 14 MEPs of the Five Star Movement – is acting more like an independent group than as a part of the EFDD, most recently since trying to join the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) in 2017. In Italy, the party has – at least rhetorically – softened its EU-critical stance. The smaller parties in the EFDD should therefore reorient themselves after the European elections, at the latest.

The ENF group has 35 MEPs, almost half of them from the French National Rally (*Rassemblement National*, formerly Front National). It is the smallest and youngest group in the EP. Its member parties are characterised by their strict rejection of the EU as a whole and also their right-wing populist to right-wing extremist positions. The ENF is the only one of the three groups in the EU-critical spectrum that is not significantly affected by Brexit. Several representatives of the parties in the ENF, such as former ENF MEP and current Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, want to transform the ENF into a movement of EU-critical parties after the European elections.

Finally, there are still 23 non-attached MEPs in the European Parliament, most of whom can be counted towards the EU-sceptical spectrum. These include parliamentarians from the National Democratic Party of Germany and the Hungarian Jobbik party, which have been judged to be so extreme by their colleagues that, so far, none of the EU-sceptic groups have wanted to admit them. The future of the AfD in the EP is also in question – it can hope for a double-digit number of MEPs in view of its poll results and the many German parlia-

mentarians. In 2014, the AfD started with seven MEPs as part of the more moderate ECR group. After several internal party splits and exclusion from the ECR, only one AfD member is formally still represented in the EP and sits in the EFDD parliamentary group. A connection to the ENF is also being discussed in the party.

## **Orbán and the Future of the EPP**

But the ambitions for a collective movement are not limited to the existing EU-sceptical factions: Salvini, among others, has invited Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to join an EU-sceptical rallying group. Orbán's Fidesz party has been a member of the EPP since Hungary joined the EU. The EPP sees itself as a pro-European party that advocates values such as the rule of law, democracy, and the strengthening of civil society. Orbán, on the other hand, is pursuing his goal of an "illiberal democracy" in Hungary and has already had the freedom of the press and the activities of foreign non-governmental organisations restricted. Orbán is increasingly sceptical about European integration in its current form and criticises the fact that it is interfering too deeply with national sovereignty. The AfD has declared both Salvini and Orbán, amongst others, as their "natural allies in Europe". In terms of policies, there are overlaps between Orbán's Fidesz with EU-sceptical, right-wing populist parties, especially in migration policy, but also with the growing levels of rejection of the current path of European integration.

Until 2018, the EPP leadership had opted for dialogue and rejected EU legal proceedings against Hungary. In September 2018, however, the majority of EPP MEPs voted in favour of initiating such proceedings against Hungary under Article 7 of the TEU, whereas the EU-sceptical groups ECR, EFDD, and ENF voted largely in favour of Fidesz. The EPP leadership and Fidesz stressed after the vote that the party would neither leave the EPP nor be excluded. However, Orbán publicly toyed with the idea of cooperating with national conservative forces. He under-

pinned this idea during a meeting with the Lega Nord leader, Salvini, at which time they announced a joint “anti-migration front” and positioned themselves in the same ideological camp. In doing so, they clearly distinguished themselves from President Macron. The latter, in turn, attacked the EPP and stressed that one party could not be the political home of Angela Merkel and Viktor Orbán at the same time.

## Expected Changes in the EU-sceptical Spectrum

The strength of EU-sceptical forces in the next European Parliament thus relies on two factors — how well the individual parties do in the EP elections, and how well they are able to work together in the Parliament afterwards.

Six months before the elections, the chances of success of the individual parties can only be inaccurately assessed by polls. The European elections, with their 27 simultaneous national elections, are particularly susceptible to deviations in the polls, low turnouts, and changes in voters’ intentions. Moreover, very few EU countries have conducted meaningful surveys on the European elections so far.

Our initial forecasts (see Figure 1, p. 6) of possible outcomes of the European elections show, however, that the ENF and the EFDD — in contrast to almost all other parliamentary groups — are expected to increase their share of seats. Apart from these two, only the ALDE can expect growth. Although the polls offer little more than a preliminary, cautious orientation, it is very likely that the informal “grand coalition” between the EPP and the S&D could lose its parliamentary majority for the first time since direct elections began in 1979.

The ECR would suffer losses because of the departure of the UK Conservatives. The EPP and the S&D must both fear significant losses. The Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA) are currently polling very high in a few member states (Germany, Luxemburg, Netherlands), but are also expected to

shrink overall. In addition, a number of new or hitherto non-attached parties are likely to enter Parliament. These include Macron’s La République En Marche! (LREM) party, which is expected to work with the ALDE group, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (LFI) party, which is expected to join the European United Left — Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL). In addition, there are a number of new parties, most of which belong to the EU-sceptical party spectrum. Before and after the elections, intensive negotiations on the accession of, and changes in, political groups are to be expected. The results of these talks depend on both political and personal factors and can therefore hardly be predicted, but they will nevertheless have a considerable influence on the size of the respective parliamentary groups.

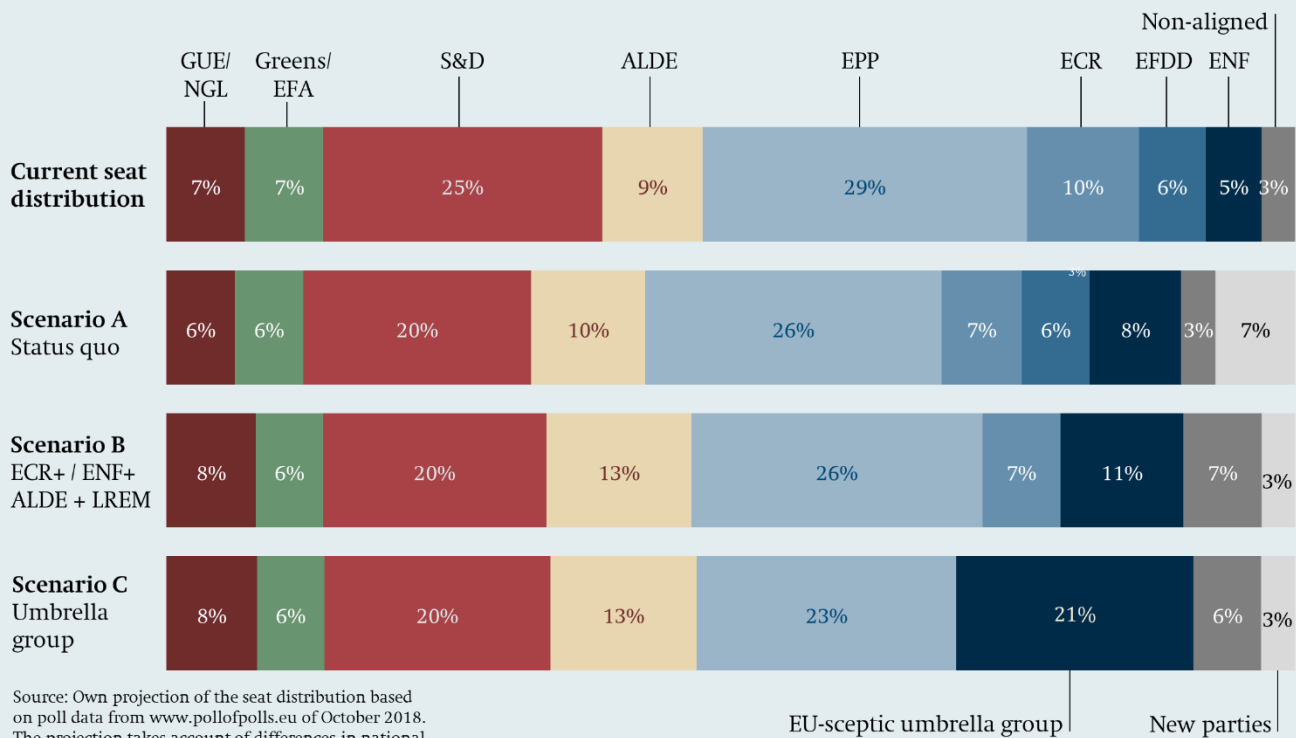
There is some evidence that the EU-sceptical spectrum will retain the same (high) level of seats — slightly more than 20 per cent — in the European Parliament after the elections and will not increase it. This may come as a surprise when one considers that EU-sceptical parties have gained popularity in national elections in almost all EU member states since 2014. Apart from the fact that political reports pay significant attention to the right-wing populist parties, this forecast can be explained by two factors.

On the one hand, the EU-sceptical spectrum is proportionally the most affected by Brexit, as the two largest groups of EU-sceptical MEPs to date (UKIP and UK Conservatives) will be leaving the EP. On the other hand, some EU sceptics already achieved impressive successes in the 2014 European elections, predating their significant national successes since then. These include, for example, the French National Front, the Dutch PVV, and the Danish People’s Party.

New gains for EU-sceptical parties in the 2019 European elections can therefore be expected primarily from parties that had not achieved a breakthrough in 2014 but have since been successful at the national level. This applies, above all, to the Italian Lega Nord, the German AfD, partially the Austrian FPÖ, and the Sweden Democrats.

Figure 1

**Possible outcomes of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament**



Compared to 2014, the fundamentally critical faction of the EU sceptics can therefore expect greater growth.

**Three Scenarios**

It remains open whether, and in which constellation, the parties of the EU-sceptical spectrum will cooperate in the next Parliament. So far, as shown, they have been divided into three smaller groups and a number of non-attached MEPs, who by themselves have less influence than a larger group. For substantive reasons, there is little likelihood that cooperation will continue to be enforceable in the future. The votes in the course of the last parliamentary term reveal that only the ECR has achieved the status of a group being capable of acting with group discipline.

There are also substantial differences between the EU-sceptical parties. This applies, above all, to three of their core political issues. First, the parties have quite different stances towards the EU. The spectrum still ranges from moderate EU sceptics,

who reject the depth of integration but want to retain the Union as such, to fundamental EU opponents, whose declared goal is to abolish the Union, or at least lead their country out of it. Secondly, the issue of migration is a matter of disagreement. Northern and Central European populists, for example, reject the distribution of refugees, whereas Southern Europeans demand solidarity from their EU partners. Thirdly and finally, a “national international” suffers from the fact that the emphasis on national identity and sovereignty contradicts European cooperation.

Yet, for reasons of power politics, there is a significant incentive for right-wing populists and EU-critical parties to symbolically underpin their strength after the European elections with a joint parliamentary group that is as large as possible. At the same time, this would give them even more opportunities to demand speaking rights in – and resources from – the EP.

Three possible scenarios for the future development of the right-wing populist and EU-sceptical spectrum after the 2019 elec-

tions can be formulated from this mixed situation. Scenario A — a continuation of the status quo with the three fragmented factions — can almost be ruled out. The EFDD, in particular, has been nothing more than an alliance of convenience since it was founded and, during the course of the legislative period, it has lost what few ties it had that bound it together. Without UKIP as the main pillar, the remaining parties will tend to turn to other political groups. The Five Star Movement from Italy will play a key role. As the second pillar alongside UKIP, it has already distanced itself in the current legislative period from the EFDD and partly from earlier anti-EU/euro rhetoric. In 2019 it could again increase the number of its MEPs and become one of the largest national parties in the EP.

In scenario B, the EU-sceptical camp would concentrate on two factions along the axis of EU scepticism. Accordingly, the EFDD would disappear, the ECR would take on the rather moderate EU-sceptical, economically liberal parties, and the ENF would assemble the fundamentally EU-sceptical, globalisation-critical parties within its ranks. In scenarios B and C, we have also included the projection that Macron's LREM will cooperate with the ALDE, and Mélenchon's LFI with the European Left (GUE/NGL).

According to current forecasts, some 46 EFDD seats would have to be reallocated. This would affect the AfD and the Five Star Movement, in particular. Currently, it seems most plausible that the AfD will join the ENF. The Five Star Movement, on the other hand, has recently weakened its EU-sceptical position and announced the founding of a new group after the 2019 elections. However, it is still completely unclear whether — and with which partners — this can succeed. If this does not succeed, the Five Star Movement would probably opt for no faction rather than forming a faction with Salvini in the ENF or strongly value-conservative parties such as the Polish PiS in the ECR. In scenarios B and C, it is therefore still assigned to the independents.

The ENF should fulfil the necessary condition of having 25 MEPs from at least seven member states. With parties such as the AfD, the French *Rassemblement National*, the FPÖ, and the PVV now firmly anchored in the national political system, the ENF would have a much more stable composition than before. However, a balance of power and common political goals would have to be found in such a group that is composed of strong parties from Italy, Austria, France, and Germany. This could be a great challenge for the parties, as some of them are dominated by individuals (Italy and France), or shaped by discussions about the political orientation, such as the AfD in Germany.

Without the Conservatives from the UK, the ECR would have to reconstitute itself and would, in the future, be more strongly influenced by Central and Eastern European national conservatives. But the group could continue to play its hybrid role, cooperating with the EPP and ALDE on economic issues, but adopting a more oppositional stance on issues of European policy and conservative values.

For both groups, there would also be the potential for enlargement in the group of non-attached MEPs and new or as-of-yet unattached parties. Beyond the announcement of the results, it therefore remains interesting to observe which camp could form the larger group in this scenario, the ECR or the ENF. In view of the current forecasts and the diversity of right-wing parties, scenario B seems to be the most plausible one at the moment.

Finally, in scenario C, the parties involved would — according to Salvini's or Bannon's declared goal — be able to form an EU-critical collective group uniting all parties of the EU-sceptical spectrum. According to Salvini's vision, this should not only include the parties of the ECR, the EFDD, and the ENF, but also win the support of the right wing of the EPP, above all that of Viktor Orbán.

In numerical terms, such a collective movement would certainly have the potential to become the largest, or second largest,



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group in the EP. For this to happen, however, the serious political differences between these parties would have to be bridged. A taboo break would also be necessary with regard to cooperation between the previous right wing of the EPP, the ECR, and the tough opponents of the EU. Although this scenario cannot be completely ruled out, it is more likely that the ENF will become stronger and gradually try to poach parties from the ECR or EPP. It will also be interesting to see whether parties considered to be clearly right-wing extremists will be invited to become members of a collective faction.

## Outlook

The scenarios illustrate what is at stake in the 2019 European elections. If the EU-sceptical camp remains as fragmented as before, Parliament's work will remain largely unchanged. A collective movement, on the other hand, would even have the chance to form the largest parliamentary group in the EP – though still be far from a parliamentary majority. However, because the political orientations of the EU-sceptical parties diverge greatly, it seems more realistic at the moment that two factions will be formed along the axis of EU scepticism and divide the parties assembled in the EFDD amongst the ECR and the ENF.

The decisive factor will be the negotiations on future party affiliations after the elections – not only between the parties already represented in Parliament, but also with the new ones. The election results alone will therefore hardly provide enough information about the majority situation in the next parliamentary term. Rather, it can be assumed that the parliamentary groups will change again and again in the course of the next election period and will try to add further members to their ranks.

If we can trust current predictions, the two camps will compete throughout the

parliamentary term about which one will become the largest EU-sceptical group: the softer eurosceptic – but rather constructive – ECR, or the right-wing populist faction around actors such as Salvini and Le Pen.

The extent of fragmentation in the EU-sceptical camp will not only determine how much influence its supporters can exert on the replacement of the Commission President and the European Council President. It will also be crucial to what extent EU-sceptical parties and MEPs can shape policy areas such as migration policy.

How united or disunited the EU sceptics are will also have fundamental consequences for the future interactions between European institutions. If the eurosceptic and right-wing populist forces in the EP strengthen, doubts will grow as to whether Parliament can continue to be regarded as a reliable engine of the European integration process. Majorities for federal reform processes will be even more difficult to find in the next parliamentary term than before.

Regarding the overall integration process, it appears that the forthcoming European elections could be a step towards a fundamental reorientation of the European integration project. After years of crisis, the election campaigns will focus primarily on the EU's self-perception. With the defeat of Marine Le Pen in the French presidential elections of 2017, many parties – including those that are fundamentally sceptical about the EU – have decided to no longer question the EU itself or the membership of their respective country. Instead, they are now calling for fundamental changes to the EU's value base. Among the many political challenges, the question of whether European integration will continue to follow a cosmopolitan ideal or whether it will turn towards a course of isolation is therefore becoming more and more pressing.

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