

Shaking Up the 2019 European Election: Macron, Salvini, Orbán, and the Fate of the European Party System

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hamann, J., Nič, M., & Puglierin, J. (2019). *Shaking Up the 2019 European Election: Macron, Salvini, Orbán, and the Fate of the European Party System*. (DGAP-Analyse, 1). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-61579-9>

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Shaking Up the 2019 European Election: **Macron, Salvini, Orbán, and the Fate of the European Party System**

by Julie Hamann, Milan Nič, and Jana Puglierin

More fragmented than ever, Europe is at a crossroads, making the 2019 European Parliament election an immensely political event. Stakes are high for Emmanuel Macron, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán, all of whom could shake up the balance of power in the EP. Macron has lost much of his initial vigor, and the disruptive potential of Salvini and Orbán is significant. If played well, their combined power could send shock waves across all European institutions.

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Shaking Up the 2019 European Election: Macron, Salvini, Orbán, and the Fate of the European Party System

by Julie Hamann, Milan Nič, and Jana Puglierin

Despite fundamental political differences, French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have three things in common: They all understood early on that the European Parliamentary election on 23-26 May 2019 could present a watershed moment in European history. Equally, every one of them has publicly emerged as a chief protagonist in a polarized “battle of narratives” focused on the polls. Most consequentially, all three of them are perceived to have the potential to shake up their respective political families and, with them, the balance of power in the European Parliament (EP): Macron among liberals, Orbán among conservatives, and Salvini among parties of the far right.

Just as he had managed during the 2017 French presidential election, Emmanuel Macron has been attempting to overcome the left-right divide on a European scale. By creating a movement beyond party structures from the center, La République En Marche (LREM) is seeking to end the dominance of the two camps – the European People’s Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) – which Macron judges inept for directing the EU in the future. Matteo Salvini’s declared mission is to unite the fractured right-wing euroskeptic camp behind himself as a leading figure. He also aspires to create a Nationalist International in the EP, which could then have sufficient power to re-shape the nature of European integration. Meanwhile, Viktor Orbán’s strategy seems to consist of the following: Keeping his options open, remaining within the EPP for the moment and, importantly, creating an informal coalition across party lines with other nationalists to block new EU legislations which would go against illiberal governments or limit the power of nation-states. Unlike other players who also claim to reshape the next European Parliament, such as the Greens or left-wing parties, Macron, Salvini and Orbán are heads of state and government (or an informal head, as in the case of Salvini). Therefore, they are seen as the key players in the fundamental realignment of the European party system following the EP election.

However, a deeper look into recent developments shows that Emmanuel Macron has, so far, failed to get on board his own population and his European partners in his mission to revolutionize the European Parliament. His potential to revamp the European elections in the same way he did the French presidential election is very slim. His attempt of framing the European elections as a battle between pro- and anti-European forces – between “progressives and nationalists” – appears to have backfired: For the most part, it has played into the hands of the camps led by Salvini and Orbán.

Although previous attempts by populist right-wing parties to form a euroskeptic alliance in the European Parliament have not been very successful, one should not underestimate Salvini’s dedication, systematic approach and political strength. At the very least, he could join forces with Orbán to create a loose union of strong nation-states to provide a more favorable environment for countries weary of the EU allegedly “dictating” their values and rules. Even if the overall balance of power in the EP remains tilted toward pro-European forces, enhanced influence and coordination among anti-EU populist MEPs will have serious implications for the interaction among EU institutions. In this sense, Salvini and Orbán appear to be the key players in the fundamental realignment of the European party system on the political right.

Emmanuel Macron: The Struggling Visionary

- **Position:** President of France
- **Age:** 41
- **Country population:** 67 million
- **Party affiliation at the EP, possible no. of MEPs:**
Cooperation with ALDE
(ca. 16-20 out of ca. 92-114)¹⁸
- **Declared ambition:**
Become a king-maker in EU centrist majority

Emmanuel Macron's plan for Europe did not quite work out the way he had hoped: Partners, notably Germany, took rather small steps toward compromises on EU reforms, and only after a long time. In France, growing unrest and protest risk paralyzing the president. It appears that Macron's promise to offer a counter-narrative against populism is backfiring and further deepening the divisions between pro- and anti-Europeans; that is, between those at ease with a globalized France and those who feel left behind. These gaps will likely become even more conspicuous during the European election.

Macron set the tone of his European campaign in August 2018 and declared the elections as a vote between "progressives" and "nationalists".¹ In light of the slumping popularity Macron is witnessing amid the yellow vests movement and beyond, his strategy is clearly past its prime. Social justice is the utmost concern for the majority of French people, and they will judge the campaign by LREM's capacity to put this topic at the top of their European agenda. Any kind of polarization risks fueling the right and left wing's intention to make the elections a "referendum" against Macron.

The Strategy of Confronting Ideologies

Ever since 2016, when Emmanuel Macron set out his ideas for reforming the EU at the beginning of his presidential campaign, pro-Europeans all over the continent acclaimed him as a European visionary: After years, when political leaders seemed trapped in the minutiae of everyday crisis management, Macron offered an impassioned plea for the EU. Evoking symbols of European identity, he argued with a mixture of emotiveness and concrete proposals, such as a eurozone budget, a common European asylum office, better defense cooperation, or massive investment in digitalization and artificial intelligence. By linking the promises of far-reaching economic and social reforms in France with the ambition to advance renewal at European level, he placed himself at the forefront of the European debate, before he became increasingly

absorbed by internal turmoil since November 2018. Defying the nationalist trend, he is defending the necessity of further European integration as part of the core national interest of every European state. His victory against Marine Le Pen, the candidate of the far right, was hence interpreted as a victory of Europeans against nationalists.

Based on this narrative, Macron chose an approach of confrontation as Orbán and Salvini had done earlier. Presented as antidotes to an open Europe, they feature as the only two politicians in an official video clip published by the French government to encourage citizens to vote in May 2019.² Macron's strategy is based on two assumptions: First, continuing the course of his presidential campaign, he is seeking to rally important parts of the electorate against his main adversary, the president of the extreme-right Rassemblement National (RN), Marine Le Pen. Second, he envisages his movement LREM to head an alliance strong enough to dismantle the existing grand coalition system in the European Parliament. Acting in concert with other like-minded centrist parties, such as Spain's Ciudadanos and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), would effectively make him the king-maker of the new President of the European Commission, and allow him to decisively shape European politics.

An Uneasy Liberal Alliance

Although LREM and the EP's ALDE agreed to create a common platform for the election campaign, Macron has retained the option to create his own political group in the Parliament after the elections. However, both options bear difficulties for LREM and Macron: Neither the European Liberals nor the voters seem enthusiastic about a strong alliance between ALDE and LREM today. First, the political group is itself divided and the coherence with Macron's EU program not evident despite the outspoken support of ALDE's leader Guy Verhofstadt. The French president's plans for an independent eurozone budget are particularly contested among some liberals, not least among members of Germany's Free Democratic Party – notwithstanding party leader Christian Lindner's efforts to dispel doubts.³ Moreover, Macron's concessions to the yellow vests movement add new elements of dissent: The announced social measures such as the increase of the minimum wage are estimated to cost around 10 billion euros and to push the French deficit over the three-percent limit. Second, as adversaries often criticize him for alleged neoliberalism, Macron's liberal label is a major stumbling block in resolving his government's crisis. French voters – who are traditionally skeptical about the notion of liberalism – were quick to notice how the presi-

dent's social turn and his warnings of ultraliberalism in Europe stood in contradiction to his alliance with ALDE.⁴ Furthermore, as the French voters are now expecting concrete action rather than abstract concepts, the alleged division between nationalists and progressives will not hold as a leitmotiv for the upcoming elections. Macron already departed from this approach and stopped evoking it publicly. However, he needs a strong result in the elections to allow him to stand in a group of his own and to convince other parliamentarians to join him.

Macron's approach is also creating tension with regard to Germany: Several times, he implicitly attacked Angela Merkel's CDU for sharing the same political group – the EPP – as Orbán's Fidesz party. What is more, he even decided to go into the elections together with a German opposition party, the liberal FDP. Campaigning openly against one's closest international ally can be a delicate matter. Macron is using common declarations to disguise his disappointment with Germany's reluctance to more energetically advance the European reforms. However, his frustration is emerging more and more often, as was evident after the weak compromise on the reform in summer 2018. The modest scope of the agreement, which was limited only to the broadest issues, was at least partially due to Germany's hesitation on taxing technology giants – an important issue for Macron in the domestic political debate. In light of these tensions, substantial divisions during the next term of the European Parliament will aid neither Germany nor France.

Five months ahead of the vote, the prospects seem dim for LREM to enter the EP in a strong enough position for Macron to modify the European institutions. The domestic tensions around the yellow vests are likely to continue and to benefit extremist parties, notably the far-right RN. Recent polls alternately place LREM or RN at the top. Le Pen's party could potentially repeat its success of the 2014 European Parliamentary election and become the leading French party with around 24 percent.⁵ The yellow vests decided to present their own list for the polls, which will almost certainly send further shock waves through the elections: On the one hand, it might help Macron by winning voters off the extremist parties; but on the other hand, it would send deputies with unclear political affiliations into the EP. Furthermore, the yellow vests' representation in the Parliament would boost their domestic legitimacy, which could be detrimental for the president. Potential European allies are reserved in announcing coalitions and reluctant to join the discourse on a gap between populists and progressives. Without a strong result, Macron will face difficulties to entice the Greens, Socialists or Conser-

vatives away from their respective groups into a new one. Unlike 2017, when LREM was catapulted onto the political center stage, now, the other national parties in France are not as weak as they had been at the time.

Macron's capacity to reshape or even fragment the European party families is weak, making a repetition of the success of 2017 at European level improbable. The rejection of nationalist or anti-European movements and their attitudes is not sufficient for creating new dynamics beyond the existing left-right-divide. The national situation which gave rise to the president's movement is too complex to be expanded and applied to the transnational context, and gaining traction at European level is proving to be no easy feat for Macron's enterprise.

Matteo Salvini: The Far-Right Strongman Keen to Join Forces

- **Position:** Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of Italy
- **Age:** 45
- **Country population:** 60 million
- **Party affiliation at the EP, possible no. of MEPs:** Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), 30-35 out of ca. 110-170
- **Declared Ambition:** Form a united euroskeptical club as the largest faction in the new EP

Matteo Salvini, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, is currently the strongest far-right euroskeptical leader in the EU. Encouraged by his meteoric rise to power in Italy, he is seeking to take his national success to the European level. His declared aim is to create a pan-European network of other like-minded nationalist parties to repatriate major EU powers from Brussels back to national capitals and to establish an anti-migrant "Europe of the fatherlands". Although previous attempts by populist right-wing parties to form a euroskeptical alliance in the European Parliament have not been very successful, Salvini's radiance and his ability to unite should not be underestimated.

Like the Rassemblement National (RN) in France and other far-right parties, Salvini's League (Lega) has moved away from its most extreme anti-European positions, including the demand for a referendum on EU membership and a rapid withdrawal from the euro. Instead, Salvini is now attempting to change the EU from within by becoming one of its key leaders. His outspoken purpose is to reverse the history of European integration and to

transform the Union from an organization that allegedly serves the interests of bankers, financiers, lobbyists, bureaucrats, and multinationals into one that represents the “real people” of Europe. In order to save an EU ostensibly on the verge of collapse, he is promoting a new European community with closed external borders, based on national sovereignty and traditional European values.

A Poor Man’s Lawyer to Save Italy – and Europe

Matteo Salvini is projecting himself as a poor man’s lawyer fighting against the establishment. He contends to speak for those who “are waking up to populism and nationalism”⁶ both in Italy and Europe, and hopes to win their support for his political goals. Just before the general election in Italy in early 2018, he told the European Parliament: “If you are afraid of the free vote of the citizens, it means that this European Union is a sinking Titanic. We will do our utmost – either Europe changes, or the people will change it, starting on 4 March in Italy.”⁷

Less than a year later, he has already successfully completed the first stage of his political mission: Compared to the 2013 Italian general election when the League won a mere 4.1 percent of the votes, Salvini managed to more than quadruple its share in 2018. The League has clearly emerged as the strongest force in the center-right alliance with over 17 percent of the votes, overtaking Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia. The League and its coalition partner, the Five Star Movement (M5S), have become the biggest winner, and triggered a political revolution in Italy that has swept aside the established parties from both left and right, creating space for an alliance of political extremes. This phenomenon has made the current government in Rome the most euroskeptic in Italian history.

Meanwhile, the balance of power within the coalition has shifted. Since entering the government as the junior partner in May 2018, the League has virtually doubled its poll ratings and surpassed the M5S. Mere months away from the European elections, the League currently sees its support up at 33.7 percent, while M5S has suffered a drop to 24.8 percent.⁸ Without doubt, the far-right League is now Italy’s strongest political force, not only in the north of the country where it originated, but also in the south. Salvini is the most popular politician in the coalition and most Italians view him as the de facto head of government. He has a massive presence on social media, radio, and television, and dominates the sphere of public debate.

Salvini’s Anti-EU-Rhetoric Strikes a Chord

Like no other Italian politician, Salvini seems to have grasped the magnitude of discontent in Italy, and the popular anger directed at “Brussels” as well as the Italian political establishment. He has successfully channeled it into support for himself and his party: According to the last Eurobarometer survey from November 2018, Italy is among the states with the largest share of respondents who have a negative image of the EU.⁹

Encouraged and inspired by his extraordinary domestic triumph, Salvini is now eager to duplicate it in the upcoming European elections. To do so, he is employing the same strategy that helped him win in Italy, adapted to the European level. He draws on open hostility to “Brussels” and the EU institutions. At times, he directs it specifically at German austerity and migration policies which he holds responsible for Italy’s poor economic performance and for turning his country into “the refugee camp of Europe.”¹⁰ It is not a coincidence that a battle has erupted with the EU Commission over the Italian budget proposal, or that Salvini have been showcasing his hardline stance on immigration at every single EU interior ministers’ meeting since taking office: By “resisting” the EU, he is signaling to Italian voters that he puts them first – true to his slogan “Prima gli Italiani” (“Italians First”). Talking to the townspeople of Ivrea in June 2018, he summarized his approach to the EU in one sentence: “If you raise your head and say ‘Stop, we are Italy, we’re tired of being treated like the last piece of filth’, the others are forced to listen to you.”¹¹

This growing euroskepticism directly stems from the global economic and financial crisis in 2008, which dealt a particularly heavy blow to Italy from which the country is still reeling.¹² In addition, many Italians felt abandoned by the northern Europeans when faced with a steep rise in refugee numbers arriving across the Mediterranean. In their view, the northern Europeans have been hiding behind the Dublin Regulation for far too long. Many Italians believe that the country has long reached the limit of its absorption capacity, and they have been accusing the other EU member states of not doing enough to help Italy in this difficult situation. The distribution mechanism adopted by the EU has proved to be a disastrous failure. Alongside the dire economic situation, this is the main cause of growing frustration with the EU which, hit by high youth unemployment in Italy, is particularly prevalent among the young.

With his tirades against the EU, his xenophobic positions, arch-conservative values, and his opposition to the “diktats from Brussels”, Salvini continues to steadily

fuel Italian euroskepticism. Consequently, Italy – which will become the third-largest economy of the eurozone following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU – is transitioning with alarming speed from one of the most europhile countries in the EU to one with the lowest support for it.

This is a serious threat to the future of the EU. A government that aims to confront the EU's institutions in order to win the hearts and minds of the Italian population is a loose cannon for the fate of the European integration project. Italy's potential for disruption cannot be understated: If the Italian government fails to navigate the looming financial crisis in the country, the implications for the eurozone would dwarf the Greek debt crisis, and likely be its deathblow. Ultimately, it could also lead to Italy's exit from the EU. Italy is simply too big to fail: Its demise would inexorably lead to the ruin of the entire system. In that sense, Salvini can hold the euro hostage when dealing with the European Commission and the other heads of state and government. He can leverage Italy's size and financial weight to suggest a credible economic murder-suicide pact.

A Bond to Change Europe

So far, Salvini's gamble has proven worthwhile. Not only do more than 60 percent of Italians support his populist coalition government. Salvini is also seen as a strongman by his fellow far-right nationalist leaders across Europe. Yet, in order to reach his goal of fundamentally transforming the EU, he needs allies. He seeks to rally them into a unified right-wing alliance, a "Lega delle Leghe" or "League of the Leagues", to create a pan-European network of nationalist parties who work together to remodel the EU. His allies in building his Nationalist International already include Salvini's long-time friend and French far-right leader Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom, and Harald Vilimsky of the Freedom Party of Austria. Jörg Meuthen, Alternative for Germany's party leader, has also pledged his support for the project.

Salvini's closest partner in the EU, however, is undoubtedly Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has praised Salvini as his "personal hero" and "companion of destiny." On multiple occasions in recent years, Salvini has likewise expressed his admiration for Orbán's European political visions and called his refugee policy "exemplary". During a discussion about the situation in Hungary in the European Parliament on 26 April, 2017, Salvini expressed his strong support for Orbán by thanking him for his policies and for "resisting the diktats of the European Soviet Union".¹³

However, so far, attempts to bundle together the right-wing euroskeptic forces in the European Parliament have failed due to differing views in key policy areas. That said, no politician has ever taken on this challenge with Salvini's dedication, systematic approach and political strength. His ability to unite is unquestionable: Over the course of just five years, he has successfully transformed the former Northern League, a party aimed at separating northern Italy from the "parasitic south", into a national party garnering support from the country's center and south. Despite their vastly different political outlooks, he has found enough common ground with M5S – a party which has gathered significant backing from disgruntled left-wing voters – to form an unlikely government coalition. Matteo Salvini's remarkable feat has been to focus attention on unifying issues rather than divisive ones.

This became clear again during Salvini's visit to Warsaw on 9 January 2019: Following talks with the leader of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party Jarosław Kaczyński, he declared his ambition to form an Italian-Polish axis of ruling populist parties to save Christian Europe and to counterbalance the Franco-German axis of EU mainstream political parties. At least publicly, the Polish side has so far shown itself less committed, as this course might run against PiS's domestic strategy to win pro-EU centrist voters in the crucial national parliamentary elections in October 2019. It is very likely that PiS will only decide about its party affiliation in the EP after the Polish elections.

Thus, in spite of all grand declarations and pledges, the decisive factor are negotiations on future party affiliations which can only take place after the European elections, and which depend on the actual results and potential combinations for forming new parliamentary groups. A strong result for Salvini's League in the European elections – which could even trigger an election at home catapulting Salvini into the prime minister's seat – would make him a natural focal point and a very attractive partner for a united alliance in the EU. In practice, however, uniting nationalist and far-right parties in the same political family will remain an uphill battle. Foreshadowing the challenges ahead, the authors of this study learned on a recent research trip to Warsaw that Kaczyński had signaled to Salvini that the latter would have to choose between PiS and Le Pen, as Kaczyński did not wish to be in the same political family as her, due to RN's strong ties to Russia.

Viktor Orbán – The Cunning Veteran Pondering All Options

- **Position:** Prime Minister of Hungary
- **Age:** 55
- **Country population:** 10 million
- **Party affiliation at the EP, possible no. of MEPs:** EPP, 15 out of ca. 180
- **Declared ambition:** Majority for anti-migration forces and formation of “blocking coalitions”

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has also defined the upcoming European Parliament election as a turning-point in European politics. As a champion of the EU’s anti-migration camp, he is eager to retain migration as the central issue in what is the first Europe-wide vote since the 2015 migration crisis. While preferring to remain within the center-right European People’s Party (EPP), Orbán is also coordinating with Salvini and others in the EU-skeptical camp for the longer term. Orbán has even managed to retain a communication channel to most populist parties – despite the fact that some of them, such as the RN and PiS, are not on speaking terms with each other.

Publicly, he has been calling on anti-migration parties to win a majority in the new European Parliament. In actual terms, however, he is preparing the ground for informal minority coalitions across political groups that would be strong enough to block unfavorable legislations. Continuous polarization over migration is also a tactical tool: It allows him to expand his influence on EU-wide campaigns beyond Hungary – a small EU country compared to France or Italy –, and to increase his leverage in the negotiations on future party affiliations after the election.

In several interviews last year, Hungary’s prime minister reminded his audience that Europe was on the verge of a new era. In his weekly radio address in September 2018, for instance, he claimed that “there has never been a more important European Parliament, and it’s possible that there will not be another one like it in our lifetime.”¹⁴

Early on, Orbán had identified an opportunity for a new era in European politics with a weakened position for “liberals”, a label he applies negatively to broad centrist forces on the political left and right that favor an open Europe based on tolerance, liberal democracy and rule of law. In populist terms, he claims that the EU mainstream, which includes current Christian Democratic leaders of Germany and other large Western European countries, has been experimenting with the concept of a “mixed civilization”. He also proclaims that “Christian Europe should not be turned into Christian-Muslim Europe”.

The Overarching Question: How Will the Two Groups Cooperate?

Orbán’s declared assumption is that anti-migration, nationalist and euroskeptical political forces will have a stronger position in the new European Parliament and change the political wind in Europe. As he stated in a further interview in October 2018: “If we succeed in electing and appointing MEPs and Commissioners who love their countries and are committed to their nations, then we will be able to launch an entirely new European policy program.”¹⁵

According to Orbán, the overarching question is how these two groups – mainstream and euroskeptics alias national populists – will be able to cooperate in the new European Parliament after May 2019. Moreover, even if euroskeptical parties do not unite into one group, they will have more political clout and underpin Orbán’s position and space for maneuver at EU level.

At least three factors make Orbán’s actions highly relevant. Firstly, the EPP – the largest block in the European Parliament – relies on Fidesz MEPs for support in the Parliament. Confident about his position, Orbán has also been cultivating ties with the euroskeptics and far-right parties at the same time. While wishing to remain within the EPP, Orbán has been unequivocal about his intention to shift the party to the right despite its leadership’s preference to stay in the political center. These dynamics within the EPP will allow Orbán to play a potentially important role in the ongoing realignment of the EU party systems. Having said that, he is skating on thin ice as frustrations over Fidesz run high: In September 2018, the uneasy relationship between the party and EPP reached a boiling point when the majority of EPP members – including group leader Manfred Weber – voted to launch a sanctions procedure against Fidesz under the Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty for breaching EU rules and values.

Secondly, Orbán’s ideological appeal among the EU’s traditional conservatives and his long-running political experience strengthen his legitimacy among most center-right MEPs. After Germany’s Angela Merkel, Viktor Orbán is the longest-serving head of government within the European Council.

Thirdly, the landslide victory in Hungary’s parliamentary elections in April 2018 has renewed the two-thirds majority of Fidesz and consolidated Orbán’s dominant position at home. However, Orbán’s government is frequently criticized for eroding democracy and for his authoritarian tendencies. In recent weeks, the Fidesz party’s hasty approval of controversial labor laws which

allowed increased overtime hours has prompted waves of large-scale public protests throughout Hungary.

Punching above One's Weight

In this power struggle among the right, Hungary's prime minister is well aware of the limited size of his country. At best, Fidesz can hope to secure some fifteen MEP seats, and co-opt two to three more from ethnic Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries. The main parties in the largest EU countries – Germany, France and Italy – are likely to gain almost twice as many. Orbán, therefore, knows that he must rely on alliances with like-minded Western European leaders. When he was asked in June 2018 about Italian media reports on a Salvini-Orbán axis, he replied with a dose of realism: Aware of “the difference in our weight classes”, he stated that “flyweight should not be confused with heavyweight, otherwise you'll find yourself flying out of the ring”.¹⁶

Nevertheless, he does appear to have high expectations from Salvini and other European populists – although he was disappointed by Austrian Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz. Kurz has recently positioned himself as a more modern, acceptable and pro-European version of Orbán, and, in doing so, effectively became his competitor within the EPP group. The Hungarian leader, on the other hand, has coordinated more closely with Salvini on the European elections. At a high-profile meeting in August 2018 in Milan, they claimed to be “walking down the same path” on Europe, pledged to form a common anti-migration front, and said they would oppose the EU policies of President Macron.

Viktor Orbán reiterated this message at his unusual press conference on 10 January 2019, which was mostly devoted to the EP election. In spite of Macron's reluctance to accept more asylum seekers from rescue ships in the Mediterranean, Hungary's prime minister continues to refer to Macron as the “leader of the pro-immigration forces” in Europe. At the same time, Orbán has praised Salvini's talks in Warsaw and called an Italian-Polish initiative to form a euroskeptic alliance after the European Parliament election as “one of the greatest developments that this year could have started with”.¹⁷

In summary, Orbán plans to stay within the EPP and continues to play it both ways to increase his influence and enhance his tactical options for the future. His guiding principle is to create a looser union of strong nation-states to obtain a more favorable environment for Hungary and his own government.

Outlook on the European Parliamentary Election 2019

Macron, Salvini, and Orbán are widely perceived as having the potential to shake up their respective political families and, with them, the balance of power in the European Parliament. However, this analysis shows that although Macron was perceived as the most powerful European politician for a time, support for him is losing momentum, and his attempts to polarize the campaign have so far mainly benefitted the populists.

Macron has failed to bring on board his own population and his European partners in his mission to revolutionize the European Parliament. By contrast, the disruptive potential of Salvini and Orbán will prove significant, even if the balance of power in the EP remains tilted toward pro-European forces. Salvini's spoiler approach and Orbán's “hybrid role” will have important consequences for future interactions between European institutions, the composition of the new European Commission, and perhaps also the assignment of top positions in the EU later this year. Below are six key take-aways for the potential of all three leaders to shape the European elections.

Macron's LREM Is out of Step with EU Party Politics

Emmanuel Macron and his party have set the tone for their campaign earlier than others in an effort to make the 2019 EP election a plebiscite on Europe. However, their attempt to frame the European elections as a battle between pro- and anti-European forces – between “progressives and nationalists” – has not borne fruit. In fact, it seems to have been counter-productive: Rallying pro-Europeans around him has proved to be difficult due to unbridgeable gaps. Meanwhile, anti-Europeans can more easily ignore differences among themselves and cast the elections in terms of a referendum against Macron.

Currently, the prospects for Macron's movement to enter the EP as a strong force seem remote. Reluctant to adopt the progressive-versus-nationalist narrative, Macron's potential European allies have so far fallen short of announcing coalitions with LREM. Contrary to the hope of LREM members after Macron's election, the pro-European movement has not spread to other European countries. An effective European-wide roll-out of Macron's 2017 strategy has failed, as – overwhelmed by domestic difficulties – Macron never actually implemented it. Programmatic differences are encumbering the alliance with ALDE, and a strong pro-European stance alone will not be enough to carry a whole campaign.

Both Macron's approval ratings and the current polling figures for LREM in regard to the European elections are poor, and a solid recovery seems distant. The domestic unrest caused by the often violent yellow vests protests is likely to continue and will probably benefit extremist parties, notably RN. The yellow vests' move to enter the EP with a list of their own will reshuffle the status quo even further. It will most likely be to the detriment of Le Pen, but could equally harm Macron as the personified opposition to the president enters EU institutions with boosted legitimacy.

Polarizing Campaign Has Benefitted the Populists

Macron's attempted polarization has, for the most part, played into the hands of the camp led by Salvini and Orbán, who have long framed their arguments through an "us-versus-them" lens. Reducing complex facts to simple opposites is a customary tool for populists. Doing so leaves them an upper hand in a polarized confrontation, when in reality, most of Europe's problems cannot be solved by simple measures.

Therefore, those who wish to preserve European integration should focus their election campaigns on concrete issues rather than engaging in a we-against-them rhetoric. It will be crucial to champion the added value which European cooperation brings and to propose concrete, actionable solutions to problems that no European state can solve on its own.

Right-Wing Euroskeptics Have Different Priorities

With their combative anti-EU statements, Salvini and Orbán have so far brushed aside existing policy differences between their parties. In actual fact, however, they are deeply divided on issues of migration and economic policies, and cooperation could prove to be very difficult. The fault lines between Salvini and Orbán are exemplary for the strong tensions that exist within Europe's entire right-wing camp. Often fraught with conflicts over priorities and interests, and with little appetite for compromise, previous attempts by populist right-wing parties to form a euroskeptic alliance in the European Parliament have not been very successful.

As interior minister, Salvini has pushed for the distribution among EU member states of asylum seekers and migrants who come to Italy, whereas Orbán has stood with other Central Europeans of the Visegrád Group in refusing any relocation. Italy and Hungary also belong to different camps in the looming battle over the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for the 2021-2027 period.

Budapest stands to lose from proposed cuts to the EU Cohesion Fund, while Italy – the most exposed EU border country besides Greece and Spain – can expect more financial help within the framework of a redesigned EU migration policy.

Orbán, together with other Central Europeans, is also suspicious of Macron's "Social Europe" agenda. He has dismissed it as merely another form of protectionism and is eager to further liberalize the European single market. Salvini, on the other hand, questions the strict rules of the Stability and Growth Pact, and advocates a flexible budget to promote growth and employment. Another dividing factor is foreign policy, most notably relations with Russia. In this regard, Kaczyński's skepticism about Salvini's (and Le Pen's) friendly approach to Russian President Vladimir Putin is also an impediment to closer collaboration.

Salvini's Leadership and Anti-Migration Sentiments Are Unifying Factors

However, two factors might facilitate a broad right-wing euroskeptic alliance at this time. Firstly, none of the earlier efforts have seen a level of commitment that matches Salvini's, nor his systematic approach and political strength. The fact that he has managed to both make the League attractive for people in southern Italy and build a coalition with M5S showcases that his strength lies in focusing attention on issues that unite rather than divide.

Secondly, all former attempts by the populist right-wing parties to form a euroskeptic alliance in the European Parliament happened before the 2015 migration crisis. Even though the total number of arrivals in the EU has since decreased, migration continues to play a crucial role in national debates and is boosting the political right in the polls. Although the camps are divided on the issue of relocation, their fierce anti-migration stance is a strong unifying factor which could lead to at least an informal coalition. All populist right-wing parties now advocate the notion of a "Fortress Europe".

Orbán Aims to Tip the Scales by means of "Blocking Coalitions"

Orbán, meanwhile, has so far stopped short of assisting Salvini in the creation of a larger euroskeptic bloc by leaving the EPP. In fact, he prefers to stay in the EPP for as long as possible – certainly as long as it remains Brussels' power-house that could protect Fidesz and advance Hungary's interests. At the same time, however, he will likely continue to coordinate with Salvini and others to increase his influence across the party blocks. Rather than disrupt the new European Parliament, the Hungarian prime

minister appears keen to capitalize on its increased fragmentation and on the stronger role of anti-EU populist forces. The optimal result for the Hungarian leader would be a very narrow functional majority in the new EP as this would provide him with additional leverage over the EPP. If the existing power balance in the European Parliament changes, new constellations of political forces could develop across traditional party divides, based more on ad-hoc coalitions. This would increase Orbán's space for maneuver. His aim is not to promote particular policy agendas or to establish coalitions behind them. Looking beyond 2019, he rather appears eager to shape "blocking minorities" to safeguard national sovereignty and shield rule-breaking populist leaders within the EU from punitive actions by EU institutions.

Next Targets: The European Commission and the Multiannual Financial Framework

Enhanced influence and coordination among anti-EU populist MEPs will have significant consequences for the interaction between the EU institutions. Although they will not have the absolute majority necessary to reject or amend the Council's positions, they could influence forming such majorities or block crucial decisions. A more divided, politically fragmented Parliament will be less likely to pass EU laws and ambitious reforms, nor will it be able to remain an engine of the EU integration process.

Internal battles in the new EP will consume considerable time and political energies. An early test will be the election of the next President of the European Commission. Much depends on other pro-EU parties which are still likely to hold the majority in the EP and be under pressure to join forces. The new EU Commission with nominees from Salvini's, Orbán's and other populist governments will also be noticeably less cohesive in a political sense.

A major political clash is likely to focus on the new EU budget for the period 2021 to 2027. The Multiannual Financial Framework proposed by the current Commission is already being negotiated among the governments. It will lead up to a unanimous decision by the European

Council, followed by a negotiation among the Council, Commission and Parliament with a final vote in the latter. The original ambition was to have an agreement before May 2019, yet this proved unrealistic. There is a hard deadline as the current EU financial framework expires in 2020.

The inter-institutional negotiations will be more complex and difficult than before. The stakes are much higher this time, which could result in longer delays and blockages than usual. Furthermore, divisive debates among EU leaders about how the EU should spend its funds will benefit populists and nationalists in the new EP. For some, inflicting reputational damage on the EU and putting the launch of key EU financial programs at risk will be a goal in itself. However, it would also come at a considerable cost to member states and their governments, including those of Salvini and Orbán, who are more incentivized to play a pragmatic role than euroskeptic leaders who are currently not in power.

Nevertheless, if the Brussels system significantly slows down or becomes dysfunctional, some national governments might start by-passing the European Parliament by striking intergovernmental deals to safeguard EU policies and the main achievements of EU integration. This would pave the way to a remarkably more differentiated European Union than we have seen in the past decades.

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Notes

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