Why a far-right party group in the Parliament will have little formal influence, but should still be taken seriously

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Introduction

Enlargement of the EU on January 1st meant the introduction of 53 new MEPs to the European Parliament, 18 from Bulgaria and 35 from Romania. Six out of this total represent extreme right national parties, thereby making it possible for MEPs of this political persuasion to join forces and, for the first time, meet the Parliament's threshold for forming their own party group. Calling itself 'Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty', the extremist transnational group will be led by French National Front member Bruno Gollnisch, who at the same time faces criminal charges for Holocaust denial in his own country.

The views of this radical party group are undeniably shocking to most parts of the EU population, and the media has had a field day publicising its provocative language and campaign style. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that, although the representation of extremists in a parliamentary assembly is always a matter to be taken very seriously, their influence on the political agenda is unlikely to be of any real significance. This is due to two factors: first, the MEPs come from very different political platforms, with most being of a single-issue nature. Although the far-right MEPs are mainly elected on the basis of their opposition to integrating newcomers and minorities into their countries, their approach to these issues differs greatly in both style and content. It may therefore prove very difficult for the group to coalesce around other issues than the basic ones of immigration and treatment of minorities and a strident stance of euro-scepticism. Second, even if a coherent agenda can be formulated by this party group, its members will face a difficult task in trying to pursue their political ambitions. Their voting power is negligible, and representatives from other party groups have bluntly stated their disapproval. In fact, German Socialist leader Martin Schulz has made it clear that he finds it unlikely to be able to cooperate with the far-right members, even on less radical policy issues.

Therefore, although there are financial incentives for the far-right MEPs to organise themselves as a group, as will be discussed below, their political success is not guaranteed. Their prospects for long term survival, in fact, may be very fragile if their national constituencies begin to realise their limited influence and the shortcomings of having extreme, single-issue parties represented in a political system like the EU.

What the far-right MEPs can achieve by joining forces

The rules for forming a party group in the EP used to pose a rather high threshold for those independent MEPs who were attracted to the idea of organising themselves as a party group. Before the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, the requirement was 19 members representing at least five countries. Although the threshold has now been raised to 20 members from seven countries, it can be argued that such rules in a 785-seat assembly covering 27 member states only present the independents with a relatively moderate threshold. And the incentives to form a party group are clear: compared to the rights of independent MEPs, an official party group in the Parliament is eligible for increased speaking time, more favourable time slots, and approximately €1 million in public funding for its administration, campaigning and general promotion of

political ideas. Nevertheless, such financial and organisational empowering obviously cannot ensure political influence in the Parliament per se. There may in fact be certain political costs entailed with becoming affiliated with a specific party group. This point will be returned to below, but here it should be made clear that although there are two ways in which party groups can seek to influence politics and policies in the Parliament, neither of these will be easily pursued by the new far-right coalition.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, way to exercise political power in a democratic parliament is through the mobilisation of votes. Since the new extreme right group is by far out-numbered by the major political groups, their formal voting power will in most cases be insignificant. Furthermore, since the group is not politically located near other party groups, its probability of being pivotal in the formation of a winning majority is also very limited. A pivotal group, which is able to turn a minority into a majority, finds itself in an extremely powerful position since the remaining members of the coalition cannot afford to exclude this group. Yet, an extremist stance will almost never lead to such a favourable position. Since extremist parties also have very constrained abilities to influence other parties' MEPs, and since many MEPs from the major party groups have in this case already expressed their concerns with the far-right group, a mobilisation of votes by the far-right seems a remote possibility. It therefore appears highly unlikely that "Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty" will be able to change the Parliament's political agenda on the basis of formal, institutional voting, even if the members manage to organise themselves as a coherent group of political representatives.

A second way of influencing politics in the Parliament is by active involvement in the working groups and committees. The most powerful positions within these delegations are commonly regarded to be those of the chair, vice-chair and rapporteur. The new far-right party group is unlikely to gain such positions, although a vice-chairmanship may be possible in one or two of the existing committees. Appointments to the position of vice-chairman are allocated through a proportional system of appointment (based on the d'Hondt electoral rule) but they also require a further vote of approval in the committee in question. Again, Mr. Schulz has been very explicit about his recommendations to the members of his party group and coalition partners, and has urged all members of the major parties to ensure that a vote of approval will not pass if a member of the far-right group seeks to gain the vice-chairman position in a committee. Having already received direct disapproval by members of the major parties, it will be difficult for the extremists to achieve much on this account, although the silence by most centre-right MEPs could indicate some willingness to cooperate if this could prove advantageous to their own positions.

If the new far-right party group cannot gain influence either through its formal voting power or its involvement in the Parliament's committees, how can they then best pursue their political ambitions? The answer is simple: since the far-right representatives are – almost by definition – populist politicians, the strategy they are most likely to follow is that of attracting media attention around their personalities and single political issues. Through their often-controversial style of communicating ideas and provocative public stances, they may be successful in creating a demand for further debate and requiring politicians to take clear political positions on such controversial issues as immigration and public attitudes towards the EU. But the Parliament has little formal power in the area of immigration, and attitudes towards the EU are hard to pin down and implement in day-to-day decision-making, unless the aim is to be outright destructive. Hence, such debates will almost inevitably be of a rather superficial and populist nature. Still, it is

possible that the German presidency's agenda for the next half year – including the aim of reviving talks on the Constitution and the celebration of the EU's 50th anniversary – may enable the far-right members to receive enough attention from the media to be recognised by the public as an established – yet radical – part of the Parliament's political face. There should be many opportunities in the coming months to make anti-EU statements to the press, even if this is done without reference to any specific EU policy. It is therefore of great importance that members of other party groups understand that the difficulties with having a new far-right political group cannot be solved within the walls of the Parliament building alone. In order to prevent this radical party group from not only gaining formal powers in the EU, but also from influencing political debates in the media, more MEPs need to clearly formulate and debate also outside the institution the consequences of electing far-right extremists. In-house confrontations or 'bullying' will not diminish the political appetite of extremist representatives; perhaps even the contrary.

A sign of increasing power of far-right parties in Europe, or merely a reflection of domestic politics?

The emergence of a far-right political group in the Parliament could at first glance appear to signify a general rise in extremist far-right political views in the population. And such an increase may indeed be a reality. It should be stressed, nevertheless, that the formation of "Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty" is not directly related to such a trend. Most of the far-right MEPs have been prominent in domestic politics for quite some time, and hence the formation of a party group cannot be attributable to a recent rise in public support enjoyed by far-right parties. It is simply because of the additional far-right members introduced to the Parliament on the 1st of January that formation of the party group has become possible.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the introduction of the new extreme right group underlines the need to take the voicing of extremist views seriously, also at the EU level. The formation of a far-right group signifies the increasing role of national-level political agendas in EU politics. It is clear that debates and decisions in the Parliament increasingly take place along the traditional left-right political cleavage as known from the domestic level, and far-right representatives are present in many of the European national parliaments. The style of the debates in the European Parliament even increasingly resembles that of the national parliaments. These trends should be acknowledged and even valued as they can help to strengthen democratic mechanisms in the EU. For example, if the divisions in the Parliament are of a party political nature, constituencies become able to hold their MEPs accountable to the promises they have been elected upon; it is by definition easier to predict the stance, for example, of a centre-left MEP on EU social policies or environmental issues than it is of an MEP whose political platform is restricted to 'anti-EU' positions. It therefore also becomes easier to 'punish' or reward party political representatives compared to single-issue politicians. Therefore, it is clear why having an identity merely based on nationalistic ambitions is a liability in an organisation that inherently seeks to overcome common, trans-border problems.

The real challenge facing members of the new extremist group in the Parliament is therefore not only to defend their positions vis-à-vis other party groups, but also to maintain their popularity in their home countries. Most of the far-right voters will probably be reluctant to accept – or understand – why their MEP may not be able to promote the nationalistic issues he or she campaigned for at the domestic level. It must seem odd to the French far-right voters, for example, that their MEPs have now joined forces with representatives from the member states whose very accession they opposed. Again it should therefore be stressed that now is an opportune time for other MEPs and party groups to explain to their constituencies the problems

with this form of extreme nationalistic representation. But it should also be acknowledged that, as with other single-issue parties, the reason for the emergence of the far-right group in the first place is the failure of other political parties to adequately confront the issues they are prepared to address.