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2019 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

# European Elections

EUROPE AT LARGE

## Austria is no model for the EU

The real news of the European parliamentary election is the center will hold.

By **PAUL TAYLOR** | 5/21/19, 4:02 AM CET



The uneasy marriage between Sebastian Kurz, right, and Heinz Christian Strache has fallen apart | Roland Schlager/AFP via Getty Images

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Viktor Orbán and Silvio Berlusconi rarely miss an opportunity to share a bad idea.

Both regard independent judges as communist agents. Both enjoy the company of Russian President Vladimir Putin more than that of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. And both seem to think Europe's future lies in an Austrian-style coalition between mainstream conservatives and hard-right, anti-immigration nationalists.

If there was any doubt that they are wrong, last week's sensational events in Vienna should have dispelled it.

Far-right populist Freedom Party leader Heinz Christian Strache was forced to resign as vice chancellor after German media published a secretly taped video showing him apparently offering government construction contracts to a purported Russian oligarch's niece in return for political and media support.

Conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz — the 32-year-old “*wunderkind*” of the new right, who brought Strache's pro-Putin FPÖ into government and imprudently handed it the running of Austria's security services, and interior, defense and foreign ministries — scrambled to wash his hands of his tainted partner. He avowed how difficult their 18-month marriage had been and called for a snap election, due in September. The other FPÖ ministers walked out on Monday after Kurz moved to fire far-right Interior Minister Herbert Kickl.

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The Viennese waltz came just as the FPÖ's top candidate in the European election was due to share a platform in Milan with Italy's anti-immigration deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, and leaders of 10 nationalist and populist parties. Their aim: to rip asunder the cozy center-right/center-left consensus in the European Parliament election and deliver power to forces bent on curbing the EU's powers.

It is Steve Bannon's dream come true. The alt-right strategist upended the U.S. establishment by helping Donald Trump conquer the White House. He has been trying for the last year to swing his wrecking ball at the EU. He has created an academy to train hard-right activists and has worked to federate their often inwardly focused

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On some days, you could be forgiven for thinking that Salvini, one of Bannon's main protégés, is the new rainmaker of European politics. It's Salvini here, Salvini there — one day with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the next with France's Marine Le Pen and leaders of the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany — talking up the myth of a united nationalist front in the European Parliament.

Some media fall for it because a populist invasion is a sexier and simpler story than the much more likely reality of a slightly modified centrist balance after the May 23-26 vote that will leave the Euroskeptics as splintered as ever and still shouting impotently — if in rather larger numbers — from the sidelines of the chamber.

**Supping with the devil**

There are lots of reasons why an Austrian coalition — to use the shorthand — was never going to happen in Brussels. The main one is that it would tear the center-right European People's Party apart, losing them more votes in the center than they could possibly claw back on the right.

In most of the 28 member states, the nationalist hard right is the mortal enemy of mainstream conservatives. From Britain to Germany, as well as France, Sweden and Poland, Euroskeptical anti-immigration movements have been eating the lunch of pro-business, center-right parties.

With the exception — until last weekend — of Kurz, center-right politicians who have cuddled up to the Salvinis of this world have ended up as the big losers. They supped with the devil but forgot the long spoon.

Spain's Popular Party formed an alliance in the region of Andalusia with the upstart Vox nationalists, then lurched so far to the right in last month's general election that it lost half its voters. Berlusconi's Forza Italia party was overtaken and spat out by his electoral ally, Salvini's League, in last year's general election. The 82-year-old media tycoon, who bestrode

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Italian politics for two decades until Salvini devoured his electorate, is testing Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing over again and expecting different results.

Incidentally, it's worth keeping Salvini's impending triumph in the European election in Italy in perspective. Polls suggest his League is set for a score in the low 30s, slightly less than doubling his general election result of 17.8 percent. But recall that Matteo Renzi's center-left Democratic Party won 40.8 percent in the Italian EU vote last time around; where is Renzi now?

## **Orbán problem**

The U.K. provides another cautionary tale. Britain's Conservatives made the fatal error of trying to outflank Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party by promising a referendum on whether to leave the EU. Then-Prime Minister David Cameron was convinced voters would confirm U.K. membership and lay the issue to rest for a generation. Instead, Farage and his Tory Euroskeptic allies won the referendum and the fallout is now threatening to destroy the Conservative Party.

Farage's new outfit, the Brexit Party, is likely to do spectacularly well this week because the European election in the U.K. is the ultimate freak storm. Those angry that Brexit has still not happened three years after the referendum have an unexpected opportunity to protest. Those desperate to stop Brexit will split their votes among half a dozen parties.

There's no reason to believe things would play out differently on the European stage. To see how poisonous a deal with populists would be, you only have to look at how the EPP has agonized over Orbán's increasingly brazen provocations before suspending, but not expelling, him just before the election.



The EPP has had fraught conversations over what to do about Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán | Tobias Schwarz/AFP via Getty Images

The EPP desperately needs Orbán's Fidesz party's 12 votes to buttress its lead as the largest group in the EU legislature. Without them, the Socialists may be snapping at the EPP's heels. Yet Orbán, granted an uncritical White House welcome by Trump last week in what looked like a Bannon-inspired gambit to make mischief in Europe, is an electoral liability for the EPP in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden.

Only months ago, EPP *Spitzenkandidat* Manfred Weber was courting the Hungarian leader and projecting himself as a bridge-builder between Western and Central Europe. He has now had to swear on the bones of saints that he will not rely on Fidesz votes in his bid to become European Commission president. Weber is also a big Kurz fan — or he was until Saturday.

It's hard to see how an EPP that dared not be seen on the same platform as Orbán before the election would conceivably cut a deal with the likes of Salvini, Le Pen or Dutch anti-Islam Freedom Party leader Geert Wilders after it.

## **Ideological opponents**

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Then there's the fact that the Euroskeptics are likely to be their own worst enemy. Despite Salvini's showboating, there is little to suggest the wide array of nationalist, sovereignist and Euroskeptical parties on the right fringes will be herded into a single parliamentary group, even by the lure of more committee jobs, staff and money.

They are scattered among three groups in the outgoing Parliament due to profound differences of ideology, as well as ego.

Poland's nationalist Law and Justice party — the largest force in the European Conservatives and Reformists group once the British Conservatives leave — needs to move toward the respectable center if its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, wants a chance of retaining power in a general election in the fall. That would make it risky to team up with Le Pen or Salvini, even though Kaczyński granted the Italian politician a rare audience in January.

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**“**When the dust settles, perhaps we will look back at the 2019 election as a “peak populism” turning point, when the tide rose but failed to flood the European Union.**”**

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Among the many issues that divide the right-wing populists are attitudes to Russia and economic policy. The Poles and Swedes are virulently anti-Putin whereas Salvini, Le Pen, Strache and Orbán are admirers of the Kremlin leader. The German and North European rightists are fiscally ultra-conservative while the French, Italian and Polish nationalists want to ignore EU budget discipline rules and boost social spending.

The “populists are coming” narrative is convenient for the EU's mainstream parties as they try to get out the vote in an election notorious for high levels of abstention. Agitating the specter of a conservative/far-right coalition may also help Europe's divided left to rally together in hopes of building an alternative alliance to the historic dominance of the EPP.

But in the boring, real world of EU politics, it's far more likely that the main pro-European forces — shaken but not broken by the populist assault — will club together to elect a middle-of-the-road, consensual European Commission president. Someone like Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, for example, or World Bank Chief Executive Kristalina Georgieva.

When the dust settles, perhaps we will look back at the 2019 election as a “peak populism” turning point, when the tide rose but failed to flood the European Union

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*Paul Taylor, contributing editor at POLITICO, writes the Europe At Large column.*

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