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MAJORITY-BUILDING IN THE NEXT EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

THE CASE FOR A MORE FORMAL COALITION

The openness of the European People's Party (EPP) to some far-right parties in the European Parliament has led to mistrust and conflict within the political centre. A written coalition agreement could remedy this – and even improve democracy at the EU level.

Will Ursula von der Leyen secure a second term as President of the European Commission? As the lead candidate of the European People's Party (EPP), which won the most seats in the EU elections on 6–9 June 2024, she has a strong political case. In the European Council, there is little appetite for further institutional uncertainty, especially in view of the snap election in France scheduled for the end of June. For the European Parliament, von der Leyen's election is the only plausible way to honour the lead candidate procedure. And in any case, no other candidate has emerged who would be able to secure the necessary majorities in both institutions.

After the election, EPP group chair Manfred Weber called on

the Social Democrats and Liberals to quickly support von der Leyen. But although very few political actors are outright opposed to giving her a second term, her path is not yet clear. Before agreeing to her re-election, the other centrist political groups seek reassurances both on policy and on how the EPP will build future majorities, particularly a renouncement of cooperation with any far-right parties in the European Parliament.

This strong interest in pre-determining future parliamentary majorities may seem surprising. Unlike the clear distinction between government and opposition parties in most national parliaments, majorities in the European Parliament have traditionally been flexible and issue-specific. Most decisions

have always been made by a “grand coalition” consisting of the main political groups of the centre: the centre-right EPP, the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and the liberal Renew Europe (RE), often supplemented by the Greens. However, this cooperation has remained largely informal, with only few procedural agreements.

Moreover, alternative majorities have often been used in some votes. In the last five years, for example, the S&D, RE, and the Greens have sometimes joined forces with the Left group to form a narrow centre-left majority, notably on environmental and social issues. The EPP, on the other hand, has at times in the past formed a centre-right alliance with RE and the ECR group, which was then dominated

by the British Conservatives. However, this alliance lost its majority in the 2019 elections and also became politically unviable after Brexit, as Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) and the Brothers of Italy (FdI) pushed the ECR to the far right.

The 2024 elections have changed the political landscape once again. Although the two far-right groups, ECR and ID, increased their share of seats, they can still be easily outvoted by the other political forces. However, the electoral losses of both the Greens and the Liberals mean that the centre-left alliance can no longer forge a majority in the new Parliament. This strengthens the position of the EPP, which will now have a de facto veto, forcing the centre-left to constantly negotiate compromises.

In addition, the EPP leadership would like to further improve the group's power position by opening new majority options to the right. This does not mean forming a stable alliance with the ECR or ID, which would be politically unfeasible. Rather, the EPP would still rely primarily on the centrist grand coalition but extend the majority-building process towards those far-right parties that are "pro-EU, pro-Ukraine and pro-rule of law" – which, according to the EPP,

includes the Italian FdI but not the Polish PiS or the French National Rally (RN). Still, even such a limited opening to the right could allow the EPP to dispense with the Greens and the more left-wing member parties of the S&D and RE when building majorities. This would shift the plausible landing zone for political compromises in the Parliament very close to the EPP's own positions.

The S&D, RE and the Greens, on the other hand, reject such a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable far-right parties. Their demands to exclude any cooperation with both ECR and ID were repeatedly dismissed by the EPP during the election campaign. However, the lack of a stable right-wing majority without the S&D and RE now gives them leverage to make von der Leyen's re-election conditional upon certain concessions. In addition to policy goals such as the continuation of the Green Deal, these concessions are likely to include an explicit, possibly written commitment not to seek majorities with the far right.

If this were to happen, the challenge from the far right, the growing mistrust between the EPP and the other groups, and the lack of alternative majorities could even-

tually result in a new democratic achievement: a genuine coalition agreement at the European level. Such an agreement would lead to more stable and formalised cooperation, increasing democratic transparency and accountability. In the long run, it would also strengthen the institutional position of the Parliament, allowing it to better articulate its own political priorities alongside the European Council's Strategic Agenda and the Commission's Political Guidelines.

In the coming weeks, both the EPP and the European Council are likely to stress the need to resolve the election of the next Commission president quickly to avoid institutional instability. Indeed, the European Council's unfortunate decision to hold the EU elections in June instead of May has shortened the projected timeframe for the nomination of the Commission. However, the Parliament should not allow itself to be put under too much pressure. Negotiating a reliable agreement between the main political groups now will improve political stability for the next five years, and it may well be worth delaying von der Leyen's re-election from July until September, after the summer recess. /