

**The ENF Group in the European Parliament:
A lasting transnational radical right populist group**

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Parties elected to the European Parliament (EP) tend to sit in long-standing groups with those parties from other countries, which most closely resemble them ideologically. We therefore find the German Christian Democrats alongside other centre-right parties such as the Spanish People's Party and the French Republicans in the European People's Party (EPP), centre-left parties like UK Labour and the Swedish Social Democrats together in the Party of European Socialists (PES), and radical left ones like Syriza from Greece and the German Die Linke in the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL). This alliance logic of 'policy congruence' (McElroy and Benoit 2010, 2011), has applied to all ideological party types in the European parliament except one: radical right populists. Unlike all other types, these parties have long been seen as 'unlikely bedfellows' (Fieschi 2000; Startin 2010). They have usually either been dispersed into small, short-lived ideologically heterogeneous EP groups that are 'marriages of convenience' to secure EP funding or they have been consigned to isolation among the Non-Inscrits (non-aligned). Of the few EP groups that have had radical right populists among their leading founding members, none have survived intact beyond a single legislature (and others have survived much less). Minkenberg and Perrineau (2007: 51) thus concluded a decade ago about radical right populists in the EP that 'there is nothing more difficult to establish than an international group of nationalists'.

This has begun to change, however, in the current parliament. While disunity among radical right populist (RRP) parties persists (McDonnell and Werner 2018), more of these parties than ever before are now allied in the group Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF).¹ Created in June 2015, the ENF has brought the French Front National (FN), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Italian Lega Nord (LN), the Flemish Vlaams Belang (VB) and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) together in a single EP group for the first time.² Moreover,

¹ Radical right populists joined different groups after the 2014 EP elections. In addition to the parties which have created the ENF, the Danish People's Party and Finns Party joined the more moderate UK Conservative-led European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) while UKIP and the Sweden Democrats formed Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) with the populist (but not radical right) Five-Star Movement and a series of individual MEPs. For an analysis of why those radical right populists joined the ECR and EFDD, see McDonnell and Werner (2018).

² The ENF also contains three Polish and Romanian MEPs. We do not discuss them as all the evidence from our interviews points to their having had no role in the group's creation and they have also been absent from the public events at which leading figures from the five main parties (FN, VB, PVV, LN, FPO) have been present.

unlike previous groups containing some of these parties, or the heterogeneous European of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group which formed in 2014 and included radical right populists of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Sweden Democrats alongside the Italian Five-Star Movement, the ENF alliance appears to be much more than a ‘marriage of convenience’. Instead, it extends beyond the confines of the Brussels and Strasbourg parliaments: for example, leaders of the main five parties have spoken at each other’s national congresses and held high-profile meetings around Europe at which they have discussed lasting co-operation and shared key issues such as opposition to immigration and the European Union (EU).

Table 1: Main members of the ENF

Party	Country	Vote in 2014	MEPs in 2014	Previous EP group
FN	France	24.9	23*	NI
LN	Italy	6.2	5	EFD
FPÖ	Austria	19.7	4	NI
PVV	Netherlands	13.3	4	NI
VB	Belgium	4.3	1	NI

Note: Votes in percentages. The number of MEPs given is those each party had at the first session of the new EP in July 2014. The FN lost several MEPs between the EP elections and the creation of the ENF in June 2015. Notably, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Gollnisch were not members of the new group. The ENF also contained two Polish MEPs along with one from the UK. The total number of MEPs in the ENF when it was formed was 36.

Source: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html>
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20150622IPR69217/opening-new-europe-of-nations-and-freedom-group-declared-formed>

The creation of the ENF raises several inter-related questions: Why have these parties come together now? Does this signal their increased closeness on key issues, in line with policy congruence theory? Or are there other relevant strategic factors? And how have they squared Minkenberg and Perrineau’s ‘international group of nationalists’ circle? In other words, how do they reconcile the strong defence and exaltation of their national interests and identities with their new international co-operation both inside and outside the European Parliament? Finally, given that radical right populist parties have generally been reluctant to publicly identify with one another, what does their new alliance mean for radical right populism in Europe?

This paper seeks to answer those questions. In the next section, we briefly discuss the main explanation of group formation in the EP, policy congruence, and outline the history of radical right populist attempts at European Parliament co-operation. Based on an analysis of Chapel Hill expert survey data on the ENF parties' positions over time and our interviews with their national and European-level elites, we then examine the drivers of this group's formation. We find that the parties have long held broadly compatible positions on immigration, European integration, and social and economic left-right issues. The creation of the ENF thus fits the 'policy congruence' theory, although, according to that same theory, these parties should have allied previously too. What the expert survey data does show has changed is the salience of the ENF parties' opposition to European integration. This has increased considerably between 2009 and 2014 for all the ENF parties, arguably making it more urgent (and justifiable) for them to band together. In other words, there may now be greater European level reasons for radical right populist unity.

Our interview data builds on this. Between July 2014 and November 2018, we conducted interviews with 14 current and former MEPs, national level MPs and key officials from the ENF parties who were able to shed light on the logics underpinning their parties' EP alliances and strategies.³ These point to a number of factors. First, we note the importance of strong party leadership, and leadership change, in facilitating the creation of the ENF. Marine Le Pen replacing her father as FN leader in 2011 and embarking on a process of *dédiabolisation* (de-demonization) of her party was crucial in this respect, but the roles played by Matteo Salvini of the League and Geert Wilders of the PVV were also very important. Second, we find that the ENF reflects the desire (long-held in some cases) to create a lasting group made up of like-minded RRP parties which, unlike those such as the Danish People's Party and Finns Party in 2014 (McDonnell and Werner 2018), are unashamed of their commonalities with other radical right populists and unafraid of adverse domestic media reactions to their European partners. Finally, and linking back to the greater salience of European integration shown by our expert survey data, we find that the ENF parties cast themselves now not only

³ Our interviews with people from the ENF parties were as follows. FN (5): 2 MEPs, 2 senior advisor/officials; 1 2019 MEP candidate; VB (2): 1 MEP (whom we interviewed in 2014 and 2015) and the party leader; LN (3): 1 current MEP and two former MEPs; FPÖ (3): 1 former MEP, 1 MP and 1 senior European-level advisor. The PVV does not speak to academics, however we were able to conduct an extensive interview with the former PVV MEP (2009-14), Lucas Hartong, in 2015. ENF interviews were conducted in Brussels, Strasbourg, Vienna and Milan.

as defenders of their own nations, but also of a wider ‘European’ (Christian) people against the threats posed by elites and ‘others’ (in particular, Islam). We argue therefore that these parties combine *international populism*, in which ‘the people’ is nation-based, and *transnational populism*, in which ‘the people’ is continental (Moffitt 2017: 410).

Radical Right Populists in the European Parliament

How can we explain the EP alliance behaviour of radical right populist parties? Scholars examining why parties (of all ideological types) form groups in the EP have looked in particular at policy motivations. Most notably, McElroy and Benoit (2010, 2011) show that groups are cohesive in their policy positions and distinct from each other. They therefore conclude that ‘policy congruence is far and away the single most important driving factor guiding national parties in their decisions to join transnational party groups’ (McElroy and Benoit 2010: 397). Bressanelli (2012) and Whitaker and Lynch (2014), who use different data and analysis methods, come to similar conclusions for the group alliances adopted by Western European parties after the 2009 EP elections. Likewise, Maurer et al. (2008: 251–2) find that, in most cases, ‘parties will choose to join the largest group that broadly shares its socioeconomic preferences’.

Despite their apparently ample common ideological ground, however, co-operation between RRP parties in the EP has been far more limited than that among other party families (Mudde 2007: 177–81). There has been a mixture of reasons for this history of division, including conflicting national interests, conflicting types of nationalism, tensions between nationalities, and fears about being tainted by association with one another (Fieschi 2000; Minkenberg and Perrineau 2007; Startin 2010). Almost two decades ago, Fieschi (2000: 518) argued: ‘the difficulties encountered in attempts to form parliamentary groups are indicative of the primacy of nationalisms which undermine any potential for ideological alliances’. Tensions have occurred, for example, over contested borders and the minority communities left on either side of them (notably, the status and rights of the German-speaking population in the Italian-controlled Alto Adige/Südtirol continues to be a recurring source of disagreement between radical right Austrians and Italians).⁴ Another source of division has been the

⁴ See, for example, the tensions in late 2018 around the Austrian proposal to give citizenship to German-speaking residents of the region: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45888287>

different natures of RRP nationalisms, principally between *ethnic nationalists* such as the VB (whose people are the Flemish, not the Belgians) and the LN (whose ‘people’ until a few years ago were simply northern Italians, not all Italians) and *state nationalists* such as FN, for whom the idea of nation-states in Europe being divisible in the ways proposed by LN and VB was anathema (Mudde 2007: 167-68). Tensions have also risen when one RRP party or MEP casts another radical right populist party’s people as ‘dangerous others’. For example, the Italian MEP Alessandra Mussolini’s comments in November 2007 about Romanians being criminals prompted the Romanian MEPs from the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty group to leave, thus causing its collapse.⁵

The former FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and another prominent FN MEP, Bruno Gollnisch, tried periodically to overcome these national (and nationalist) differences between radical right populists and achieve what Fieschi (2000: 521) termed ‘the reconciliation of attitudes through the concept of a Europe of the Fatherlands’. We can see that sentiment explicitly for example in the statement on the (now defunct) webpage of the (also now defunct) loosely organised European National Union (ENU – known as ‘Euronat’) launched by FN in 1997: ‘The Nationalist phenomenon cannot be and will not be restricted to an island, cooperation is essential to achieve freedom and our common goals’ (cited in Startin 2010: 437). Similar transnational principles underpinned the ‘Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty’ group. As Startin (2010: 438) argued, the idea a shared Christian European identity and values system being under threat, acted ‘as a motivating factor with regard to the rationale behind the group’s formation, certainly among the main protagonists from Austria, Belgium and France’ (i.e. the FPÖ, VB and FN).

These difficulties have been compounded by the perceived domestic reputational risks of European level cooperation for radical right populists, especially those seeking to moderate their image at national level and/or to enter national governments via coalitions. For example, Fieschi (2000) and Startin (2010) note how the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) avoided allying with other radical right parties such as the French Front National (FN) in the late 1990s, due to the FPÖ’s goal of being accepted as a potential coalition partner by the centre-right after the 1999 general election. We can see the same dynamics at work, particularly vis-à-vis FN for other radical right populist parties, which have either been in government, or

⁵ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/15/eu.thefarright>

were seeking co-operation, with mainstream parties. For example, the founder-leader of the Italian Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi (at the time a minister in the Berlusconi-led centre-right coalition), declared in 2002: ‘We are the opposite of Le Pen and anyone who compares us is a lowlife’ (*Corriere della Sera* 2002). Similarly, Geert Wilders, whose party would subsequently prop up a minority centre-right government from 2010 to 2012 in exchange for policy concessions, stated in 2008: ‘My allies are not Le Pen or Haider’ (*The Guardian* 2008). Discussing why some European radical right populists shunned others, Almeida (2010: 246-47) concluded that radical right cooperation at the European level is

‘a strategy [that] implies a public disclosure of affinities with other radical right parties. While membership in a radical right political group opens the possibility to frame policy preferences in a European context and to maximize resources and visibility in the EP, it represents a costly strategy in terms of domestic legitimacy’.

The pessimism among scholars surrounding the feasibility and durability of radical right EP groups appeared confirmed by the experience of the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty EP Group in the 2004-2009 Parliament. Containing the Front National, Vlaams Belang, and Austrian Freedom Party (by now out of government and not seeking mainstream partners), along with a mixed collection of far-right MEPs, this group lasted only from January to November 2007 before splitting (Almeida, 2010; Startin, 2010). Moreover, in the subsequent 2009-14 legislature, the FN, VB, FPÖ and PVV each remained on their own in the Non-Inscrits group for the full five years. In the run-up to the 2014 EP elections, however, the prospect of a group containing many of the major Western European radical right populist parties appeared achievable for the first time. In the 18 months beforehand, the Front National, the Dutch Party of Freedom, the Lega Nord, the Vlaams Belang and the Austrian Freedom Party all committed to forming a common group in the next legislature. After the election, these parties easily had the required 25 MEPs to create a group. But, since EP groups must also include MEPs from at least seven different member states, they were short of two country delegations. The putative ENF group thus failed to achieve the seven-country requirement in 2014 but eventually managed to do so in June 2015, creating the ENF.

The ENF – An ideologically homogenous group

In this section we look at how well the ENF parties fit together on key policy dimensions. Given that we also want to investigate whether anything has changed regarding policy

positions in recent years that might explain why the parties have allied now, we examine the CHES data for both 2009 and 2014 (Bakker et al 2015). We will examine first their proximity to one another on the key issues of European integration and immigration and then their social and economic left-right positions.

Figure 1: Development of the parties in ENF, European integration

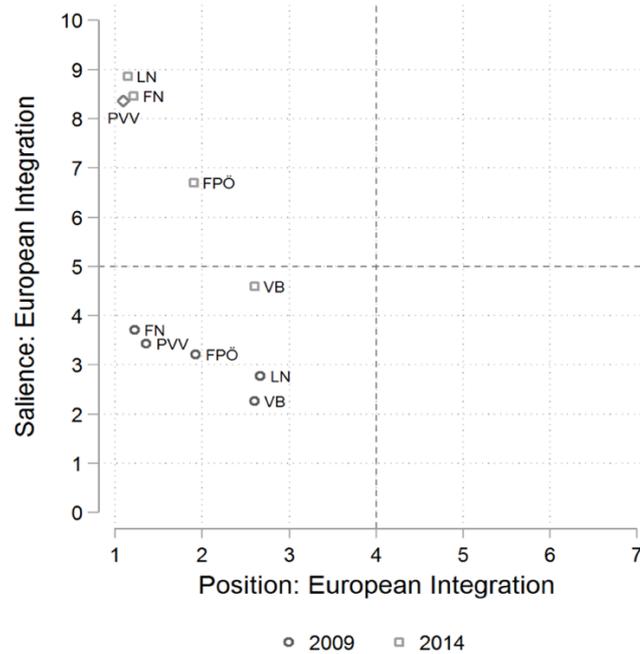


Figure 1 shows the party positions and saliences regarding European integration in 2009 and 2014, with higher values denoting more supportive positions and higher saliences. We find that the five ENF parties are spread between negative positions around 3 to the very negative position of 1 (with a tendency towards the ‘very negative’ end of the scale). At the extreme, the PVV and FN are located constantly around the most negative position of 1 while the FPÖ is stable on a position of 2. The Lega Nord has moved from a less extreme negative position in 2009 to the extreme end in 2014. Only the VB remained in both years on more moderate positions between 2 and 3, which is understandable given that it is located in the country hosting the European Union, with all the economic benefits that derive from that.⁶

⁶ As the Vlaams Belang leader, Tom van Grieken, observed in our interview in 2015, as Flemish nationalists, his party cannot very well say they are ‘against Brussels’ in the same way as other European parties can.

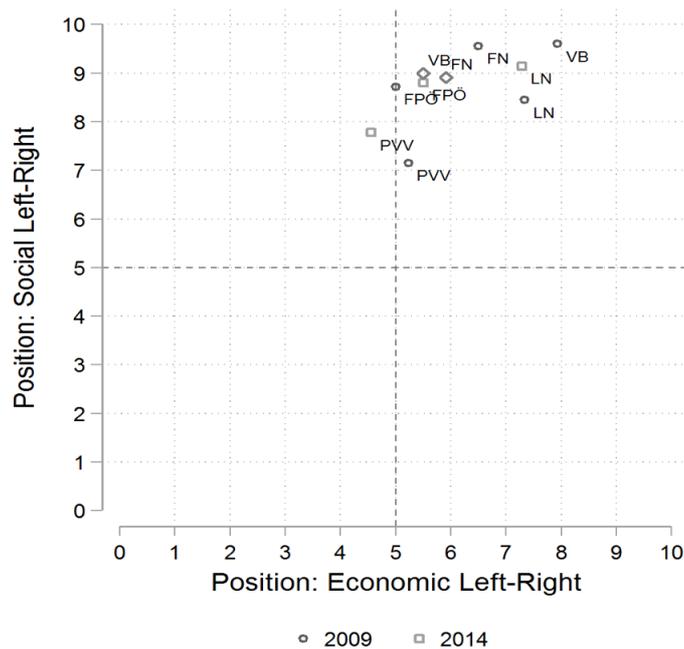
While the salience of European integration was low or moderate for all five parties in 2009, we find a strong increase in 2014. This applies to all ENF parties, but particularly to the LN, FN and PVV. This is not, however, specific to the ENF. If we compare the mean salience of all parties included in the CHES data set for 2009 and 2014, we find a general increase of salience from 2.8 (2009, N = 137) to 5.9 (2014, N = 122). Nonetheless, this increased salience might have been a facilitator for the formation of the ENF group as it makes a strong unified Eurosceptic group a timelier project.

Table 2: Party positions on immigration policy

Year	VB	LN	FPÖ	FN	PVV
2014	9.6	8.4	9.5	9.8	9.8
2009	9.7	9.9	9.3	9.7	9.9

Table 2 shows the five parties' positions regarding immigration policy. Higher values in the position scores mean that parties prefer a more restrictive immigration policy, with 10 as the maximum. We find little change between 2009 and 2014 among the positions regarding immigration, with the parties consistently favouring very restrictive immigration policies. CHES experts were also asked to evaluate the salience of immigration in the 2009 round of the survey and to name the three most important policies for each party in the 2014 survey. In both measurements, immigration came out as extremely salient for the parties, being ranked on the salience scale between 8 and 10 in 2009 and as the most important issue in 2014 for all five main ENF parties. Hence, here too, we find strong agreement among these parties.

Figure 2: Development of the parties in ENF, left-right positions



The picture with regard to the party positions on the generic economic and social left-right dimensions is slightly more mixed. Figure 2 shows that the ENF parties have broadly occupied the upper-right corner of both economic and social right positions in 2009 and 2014 but with more intra-group variation than on European integration or immigration. On the social dimension, all parties are located clearly in the conservative camp. On the economic dimension, we also find some heterogeneity and a move to the left, as the 2014 positions indicate. In particular, both the PVV and the FPÖ crossed into the left space of the economic left-right dimension. These findings are consistent with recent work showing how radical right populist parties are increasingly adopting socio-economic positions to the left of their mainstream right-wing competitors (Roth et al., 2018).

The five main ENF parties are thus now in line with the dominant theory that parties with similar policy profiles form EP parliamentary groups. They are consistent in their positions and saliences on European integration and immigration, which are defining policies of contemporary radical right populist parties. While there is slightly more incongruence regarding the positions on the economic and social left-right dimensions, there is no obvious misfit on these aggregate positions either. However, it is not the case that anything in particular has changed regarding positions. In other words, it is not that these parties have

become significantly more policy congruent since 2009 in a manner that would explain why they have allied now. As we noted, the only significant difference between 2009 and 2014 is a shared increased salience of European integration, which perhaps provided a more prominent and urgent platform for cooperation between the ENF parties.

An idea whose time has come

Other than the increased salience of European integration, if there were no significant policy positional changes, why did the five core ENF parties decide to form a group when they did? A first obvious explanation is that they had the numbers to do so. Nonetheless, we know that previous attempts of the FN and VB to form groups with like-minded parties even when the required numbers might have been available either failed or did not last very long (Startin and Brack 2017: 30-37). We also know that the LN, the PVV and the FPÖ had – either on specific occasions or consistently – shunned alliances with some or all of their ENF partners (especially FN) due to their fear of domestic audience costs (Fieschi 2000). So, if it is not a newfound policy convergence that has caused change or simply a question of numbers, how do we explain the creation of the ENF? From our interviews with MEPs, MPs and senior advisors from the ENF parties, we identify three main factors: (1) party leadership, especially the internal and external effects of leadership change in the Front National and Lega Nord, but also the ability of radical right populist leaders like Le Pen, Salvini and Wilders to take and implement decisions swiftly and with little discussion; (2) the culmination of a long-held desire to move beyond fears of domestic audience costs deriving from each other's reputations and instead finally create a lasting international radical right populist group that is unashamed of its commonalities; (3) the re-casting of their mission as not just a series of national ones, but a European one. Let us take these three factors in order.

Party Leadership

One of the ironies of the ENF is that, while it brings the long-standing desire of Jean-Marie Le Pen for radical right populist unity to fruition (see our earlier comments on this), its creation is rooted in his resignation as FN leader in 2011. Being associated in any way with Le Pen Senior and, in particular, his anti-Semitism, remained a strong deterrent for radical right populist parties like UKIP and the Danish People's Party in 2014 (McDonnell and

Werner 2018). The new FN elites around Marine Le Pen were well aware of this. As her main European advisor, Ludovic de Danne, acknowledged, when discussing why the Sweden Democrats did not join the ENF: ‘I think the reality is that they don’t want to mix with Jean-Marie Le Pen’. Similarly, the FN MEP Aymeric Chauprade told us in 2015 that, because of the Le Pen name, ‘some people are still afraid. They stay with the old perception of my party which was considered like a far right party, but which is not the case actually now’. For the other ENF parties however, the FN leadership change, and Marine Le Pen’s subsequent attempt at *dédiabolisation* (‘detoxifying’) of the party’s image, appears to have had a positive effect.⁷

This was confirmed to us by both Gerolf Annemans (former VB leader and currently MEP) and Johannes Hubner, FPÖ MP responsible for European and Foreign Policy. As the former put it: ‘I join Marine Le Pen, not the father, to show you exactly what I mean’. While one could argue that the VB in particular had been close already to the FN in previous years when Jean-Marie Le Pen had been leader, the same could certainly not be said for Geert Wilders. The strongly pro-Israel PVV leader had previously repeatedly refuted any association with Jean-Marie Le Pen. Indeed, Vossen (2017: 77) notes how the party’s MEPs in the 2009-14 Parliament were under orders not to appear near Jean-Marie Le Pen or Vlaams Belang representatives. As the former PVV MEP from 2009 to 2010, Louis Bontes recounts: ‘We even had to change seats in parliament because old Le Pen sat a couple of seats behind us and we could easily have ended up in a photo together that way. Geert wouldn’t allow that under any circumstances’ (cited in Vossen, 2017: 77).

According to former PVV MEP (2009-14), Lucas Hartong, his leader’s decision to pursue an alliance with Front National thus came as an unwelcome surprise to the party’s MEPs, given both Wilders’ previous position regarding the undesirability of EP alliances and FN’s bad reputation in the Netherlands.⁸ Hartong told us how he sought to change Wilders’ mind about teaming up with FN:

⁷ Whether Le Pen has really succeeded in changing her party’s more toxic elements is another question. See, for example, Mayer (2015) who argues that the new FN looks a lot like the old in terms of its supporters’ attitudes towards Muslims and Jews.

⁸ Hartong resigned from the PVV in 2014 because of the new alliance and the anti-Semitic reputation of some of the ENF parties. In our interview, he explained: ‘Marine Le Pen is not a bad woman I think. She is different from her father, but her father is a very anti-Semitic person. That for me was a red flag and also the FPÖ from Austria was founded by some former Nazis and still there’s a very strong undercurrent in - within the party that is very focused against Israel, against Jewish people’.

‘I said “please Geert don't do this. It's not good for our party. It's not good for our voters in public perception, but also to reach our goals. It is so wrong to run with these people”. He didn't react’

Wilders’ lack of reaction likely reflects his iron control of the PVV, of which he is the only formal member and is therefore accountable only to himself (De Lange and Art, 2011: 1240-41). Or, as Hartong put it, Wilders ‘is the party’. Consequently, not only did he not have to consult about the new alliance but he was able to act as its driving force in 2013 (Vossen 2017: 78). If Wilders’ control over the PVV helps explain why it was able to change its stance on the FN and EP alliances so quickly and decisively, the same is true regarding Marine Le Pen’s treatment of her own father. Having first suspended him from the party in May 2015 following (more) comments about the Holocaust, Marine Le Pen then led moves to abolish his position of honorary president and, finally, to expel him from the party. Discussing how Le Pen Junior has changed the party since taking over, Ivaldi and Lanzone (2016: 155) refer to a process of ‘Marinization’ by which ‘the FN continues to be organized around charismatic leadership with a weaker intermediary structure and a very strong central office’. This process has not only enabled Marine Le Pen to change positions quickly (e.g. regarding the Euro in 2017/18) but has also enabled her to sideline and then remove a major obstacle to cooperation with other radical right populist parties: her father.

Leadership change and the role of the leader are also important in explaining the Lega Nord’s decision to join the ENF. While, Roberto Maroni met Wilders in the first half of 2013 (Vossen 2017: 78), it was from the moment the new Lega leader Matteo Salvini took over at the end of the year, that the party placed all its eggs in the future ENF’s basket, inviting its leading representatives to speak at Salvini’s first congress as leader in December. This was despite the fact that the LN at the time was still formally part of the EFD group in the European Parliament. Like Wilders, Salvini did not discuss the new alliance with most of his party’s 2009-2014 MEPs. The LN delegation leader in that parliament, Francesco Speroni, explained to us in a 2014 interview: ‘No, we were not consulted...I was just presented with it as a decision, that’s how it happened’. Nonetheless, Speroni recognized that joining parties like those in the ENF represented a better policy fit. As he acknowledged: ‘I had an excellent relationship with Nigel [Farage], but politically, we are much closer to FPÖ and so on’.

Finally, as regards Salvini, it is worth noting that his replacement of the LN's regionalist, anti-centralist stance with an Italian nationalist, anti-Brussels one has made it easier to ally with the strongly centralist and nationalist FN by removing the 'ethnic vs state nationalist' differences between the parties (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Again, the fact that Salvini has been able to change something that had been so fundamental to the Lega – its regionalism – speaks to the very strong leadership that he has been able to exert.

Proud Populists

While party leadership changes and dynamics help explain why the ENF alliance happened when it did, our interview data also underlines how its creation reflects the culmination of a desire to finally create a durable international group of radical right populists that are proud to stand together and work towards common objectives. This had long been a goal of Le Pen Senior, but there were also figures in the other parties that had been working towards greater radical right cooperation in the years before the ENF's creation. Hence, while there may not have been formal links between some of the ENF parties prior to 2013, there were low-level international contacts based on, as Mudde (2007: 172) noted, 'personal relationships between leading party members in different countries'. In particular, the former MEPs Andreas Mølzer of the Austrian Freedom Party and Fiorello Provera of the Lega Nord had been active in attempts to counter what Mølzer described to us as the 'reciprocal marginalization of the marginalized'.⁹ As he explained:

'These parties are isolated and labelled as "extreme right" and, if they have contacts at European level, the establishment and media try to impede them by saying that the other parties of the democratic European Right are 'extremist' or 'antidemocratic'. This strategy worked for a long time. Out of fear of being denigrated at home because of their collaboration with other parties, often contacts were dropped at European level. Interrupting this vicious cycle has always been a particularly important objective for me'

Provera expressed similar views, saying that his aim in quietly nurturing relations with what he saw as likeminded parties between 2009 and 2013 had been 'to finally bring out of

⁹ Mølzer had been an important figure for many years in trying to bring European radical right parties together. See Mudde (2007: 180-181). Somewhat ironically given that their parties finally joined the same group, neither Mølzer nor Provera were MEPs in the 2014-19 Parliament. While Provera was not re-selected as a candidate (following Salvini becoming leader), Mølzer had to withdraw from the election in April 2014 following controversial and racist remarks made at a party meeting. See: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/austrian-far-right-mep-andreas-molzer-quits-eu-elections-over-race-remark-1443922>

isolation the various parties – Lega Nord, Front National, FPÖ, etc. – that get each labelled as xenophobic and racist parties’.¹⁰ Their failure to co-operate on shared themes had been, in his view, due to their ‘falling into the trap of left-wing political correctness’, avoiding one another and therefore not speaking with one voice on issues such as immigration. By contrast, he added, ‘the Left has been doing this forever. Think of the Socialist International, to name but one’.

These comments resonate with what we know from other studies. Many RRP parties have been wary – and some continue to be – of the domestic consequences of frequenting similar parties from other countries (Startin and Brack 2017: 41). Parties like the Danish People’s Party and the Sweden Democrats fear how audiences in their countries (and especially the media) will view the company they keep abroad (McDonnell and Werner 2018). In particular, given their ambitions for national mainstream acceptance as potential partners in government, they seek to use their European affiliations to prove their domestic democratic credentials. They thus forsake European policy congruence in favour of respectability and participate in the ‘marginalization’ of other radical right populists. To differing extents, this has also been true of the LN, PVV and FPÖ in the past, when they have been in government and/or aspired to mainstream acceptance at home. For example, when the possibility of national office was on the table at the end of the 1990s, the FPÖ kept its distance from other RRPs in the European Parliament, especially the FN (Fieschi 2000; Almeida 2010).

In this decade, however, despite the fact that both the FPÖ and the LN aspired to becoming parties of government again (and duly succeeded in 2017 and 2018), they did not believe that co-operating with other radical right populist parties in Europe would cause excessive votes/office costs nationally. Wilders has obviously made the same calculation. We see this as a ‘coming of age’ for such parties. In other words, instead of seeking to hide their similarities to other RRP parties and avoiding alliances for fear of media and other elite reactions, the ENF members are proudly part of a European radical right. Moreover, rather than seeing it as a disadvantage in terms of their image, some view it as a positive. For example, Lorenzo Fontana – the former Lega Nord MEP (now government minister) who claims to have introduced Salvini to Marine Le Pen – told us in 2015 that the ENF alliance

¹⁰ Provera says that he was given responsibility for exploring foreign links by the LN leader, Umberto Bossi. According to him, ‘we were nearly always in agreement, but it was a subject that was discussed very little within the party’.

was ‘important for us, also as regards the media, to show there are people in Europe who think like us’. Similarly, when discussing the long-standing isolation imposed on his party through the *cordon sanitaire* in Belgium, Annemans of the VB said in 2015 that the ENF alliance means:

‘all of a sudden we are amongst the biggest parties of other member states of which two or three are very strong and important member states in European Union. It’s a good thing for our image. It’s an oxygen mask’

Overall, the message we got from interviewees across the ENF parties was that they believed most media in their respective countries will criticize them whatever they do and that this was therefore not a good reason to continue to avoid policy congruent alliances. It would require a different study than we are engaged in here to examine how changing media structures and the fact that the public is less dependent on mainstream media for its political information are influencing radical right populist strategies, but they are surely relevant to some degree in understanding this attitude. Furthermore, given the opportunities offered by social media for political leaders and parties to communicate directly with voters (something which Salvini and Wilders certainly do very well), some radical right populists may simply view old media as less relevant to disseminating their message (Van Kessel and Castelein 2016).

The fact that the ENF parties perceive image benefits from their alliance is underlined by the high-profile events that they have organised outside the EP, such as their leaders’ meetings in Milan in January 2016 and in Koblenz in January 2017. These events also speak to the fact – as emerges clearly from our interviews – that the ENF is not primarily designed to achieve specific European Parliament objectives. Of course, the office benefits such as increased funding and speaking time are welcome, but – in contrast our interviews with UKIP regarding what they themselves termed the EFDD’s ‘marriage of convenience’ – the ENF was discussed by interviewees as an alliance that would go beyond the 2014-19 parliament, both in terms of length and scope. As the leader of the Vlaams Belang, Tom van Grieken, told us in June 2015: ‘I’m not personally interested in alliances for a short term, I only want a long-term alliance’.

Of course, not all radical right populists are ‘proud populists’ like those in the ENF. In particular, ENF interviewees referred to the refusal of the Sweden Democrats not to join

them, attributing this to immaturity and excessive pragmatism. As a leading FPÖ advisor commented to us regarding the SD:

‘they think that if they are aligned to us it may cause a problem for them for the upcoming elections for example... We know that this is not the case. I mean we know that if they’re aligned, they will be attacked. If they are not aligned, they are also attacked, so we try to explain to them whatever you do they will not be different. But they are a young party. They have young people’

Annemans made a similar comment to us in 2014: ‘the EU-critical parties have a whitewash order: ECR upstairs, and then Farage between us, and then you see, that’s a hierarchy of being whitewashed’. This appears to have been a frequently-used metaphor among radical right populists in the EP since it was also used in our interviews with both the FPÖ advisor and the Lega’s Fontana, who complained about ‘this problem that some have of trying to clean up their image, which was not even dirty in the first place!’

The Saviours of Europe

How does the ENF resolve the difficulties of maintaining an ‘international group of nationalists’ (Minkenberg and Perrineau, 2007: 51), with its multiple national interests and identities? From our interviews, it emerges very clearly that this is not the problem for the ENF parties that it seems to have been for radical right populists in the past. This is because, differently from UKIP, the ENF parties are able to embrace a shared European identity alongside their various national ones. As the FN’s Aymeric Chauprade explained to us: ‘our position is clearly critical towards Europe and institutions. Not towards the European identity. We believe in the European identity’. Similarly, Fontana of the Lega stated: ‘we consider ourselves fully European. We believe that collaboration between European peoples is fundamental for the future’.

This collaboration is said to be evermore fundamental due to the threats posed in the Twenty-First Century to the peoples of Europe, not only from above by national political elites and the bureaucrats of Brussels, but also from below by the ever-increasing presence of ‘dangerous others’ on a continental scale. In particular, the ENF parties cast their cooperation as essential in order to protect the sovereignty, identity and security of (Christian) Europeans from secular and globalist elites, immigrants and, especially, Muslims. As a senior FPÖ

European-level advisor told us: ‘we are against the Islamization of Europe...we want to defend the identity, the cultures, the different languages, the different peoples of Europe’. Similarly, Chauprade explained:

‘For us “to be” is more important than “to have”. Of course, the economy is very important. We like reforms, we would like to transform the French economy to improve it. But the issue of the identity of France and the identity of Europe regarding the migrant problems, is something which is central’

The ENF thus recalls the efforts in previous decades by Jean-Marie Le Pen to foster a common European sense of belonging and mission among radical right populists. As he declared, when setting up the Euronat initiative: ‘we have expressed the wish to go beyond patriotism, beyond our respective feelings of national patriotism, to achieve a European patriotism’ (cited in Fieschi et al. 1996: 238-9). The ENF does indeed go beyond those ‘respective feelings of patriotism’. If the Danish People’s Party, Finns Party, UKIP and Sweden Democrats in the current EP have practiced solely what Moffitt (2017: 410) terms *international populism*, in which there are ‘international ties between populist actors who are concerned with representing firmly nation-based conceptions of “the people”’, we can say that the ENF parties go further by combining this with *transnational populism*, in which the people that populists appeal to and claim to speak for goes ‘beyond the borders of the nation-state’. In other words, the radical right populists of the ENF present themselves not only as working with likeminded parties in EP groups in order to defend their national ‘peoples’ from a series of bad elites and ‘dangerous others’ threatening them at national level, but also as doing so to defend a European ‘people’ from elites and ‘dangerous others’ at continental level (see also De Cleen 2017: 356). Moreover, in line with populists’ recourse to the language of ‘crisis’, they cast this European people as facing impending doom, with radical right populists as their only possible saviours. Or, as the senior FPÖ official put it to us:

‘We think that we are the last hope of the people. Europe will fail. We will have a big problem in the end. There will be a collapse whether it's the Euro or all this mass immigration. In 20 years you will not recognise Europe anymore. That’s what we think and so those parties we are talking about are the last hope of these people. That’s why we have to share our experience; we have to share our views and work together. This is our main goal. We don’t care about having a little bit more money or resources’

Conclusion

Unlike the long-standing groups containing other party families, there has never been a lasting European Parliament group consisting entirely of radical right populist parties. Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) was designed to end that anomaly. Bringing together the Front National, Vlaams Belang, Austrian Freedom Party, the Italian Lega Nord and the Dutch Party for Freedom in a group for the first time, the ENF has not only established a presence in the EP, but its core parties have undertaken a series of initiatives outside the Parliament which indicate a long-term commitment. In this paper, we have examined the drivers of this alliance and asked why it has happened now, especially given the difficulties radical right populist parties have faced in the past in collaborating at European level.

Using Chapel Hill expert survey data, we showed that, while the main parties of the ENF are indeed very congruent in their main policies, we do not see any significant change in this congruence compared to 2009. In order to explore more deeply the reasons underpinning the group, we therefore analysed interviews with key figures from the ENF parties. These showed how the members of the ENF parties are aware that their European alliances might be met with negative national media feedback. But instead of avoiding this risk, they try to break the ‘vicious cycle’ of reciprocal demonization and marginalization. Achieving this has been aided by the resignation/removal of one of the most controversial Western European politicians of the last decades, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and his replacement by Marine Le Pen, who has sought to move the FN’s image away from associations with the extreme right and anti-Semitism (and away from her father). The very fact that parties such as the PVV and the LN are now willing to stand alongside the FN indicates that her *dédiabolisation* strategy has been (at least in part) successful at European level. As we also argued, the strong control that Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders and Matteo Salvini exert over their respective parties has in turn enabled them to make significant changes that have facilitated their alliance quickly and decisively. Finally, our interviews revealed that the ENF represents the culmination of a long-term project on the far Right. The ENF views itself as a lasting cooperation between defenders of European identity and values (just like Jean-Marie Le Pen had once envisaged). While still emphasising their respective national identities and sovereignty, the parties also make recourse to a broader notion of shared European identity that is under attack by both Brussels bureaucrats and non-natives, especially Muslims.

Thus, several aspects changed in 2014/2015. While radical right populists like the Danish People's Party and the Finns Party sought national legitimacy via EP alliances with mainstream parties in the ECR (McDonnell and Werner 2018), parties like the PVV and Lega went in the opposite direction, towards radical right populists whom they had previously rejected. As we have seen, the ENF radical right populist group is made up of parties that are unashamed of their commonalities and can sit together, just as other established ideological party types do. This normalization (or 'coming of age') of party behaviour might also have been aided by the fact that, in the aftermath of the European refugee crisis, the core issue of these parties – immigration – has increased in importance. Moreover, as Eurobarometer surveys have repeatedly shown, it is an issue that is perceived by both electorates and parties not so much as a pressing 'national' question threatening native wellbeing, but as a 'European' one.¹¹ And a primarily European problem requires European solutions. In that sense, the ENF is incentivized to espouse not just international populism, but transnational populism.

¹¹ If we look at recent Eurobarometer results from the countries of eight ECR, EFDD and ENF radical right populist parties (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden), we can see this quite clearly. While immigration has been listed as the most important one facing Austria and Denmark since 2016 and has often been cited as the second most important in Italy, it is constantly either the first or second most important issue facing the EU right across our cases. Moreover, since 2016, either immigration, or the closely related issue of terrorism (given that radical right populists link the two), has been deemed the most pressing concern facing the EU in all eight countries.

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