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Divided in groups, united in positions? The rise of selected right-wing populist parties in the 2024 European elections and their policy positions on European integration in climate and security

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Abstract

Right-wing populist parties have expanded their voter support and presence across the European Union (EU), as reflected in the 2024 European elections. Despite shared ideological characteristics, such as Euroscepticism, nationalism and a critical stance on supranational governance, these parties organized themselves into three separate right-wing groups in the European Parliament (EP) after the elections. This thesis examines how three selected right-wing populist parties from different national contexts and political groups - Fratelli d'Italia, Hungary's Fidesz and Alternative for Germany - agree or diverge in their positions on European integration in the areas of climate and security, considering economic aspects and the broader implications for the future of European integration. Combining populism theory, liberal intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism as theoretical lenses, the study applies a qualitative comparative case study method based on party manifestos, position statements, documented speeches and interviews as well as research reports. The findings show that all three parties oppose deeper EU integration in climate and security, emphasizing national sovereignty and rejecting centralized EU funding mechanisms. While they converge in their criticism of the Green Deal, differences emerge in foreign policy stances, particularly regarding relations with Russia and support for Ukraine. Based on these findings, the thesis develops a set of possible scenarios for the future of European integration, ranging from uncoordinated blockage and fragmentation to the formation of a coordinated right-wing populist bloc. The results are relevant for policymakers and scholars seeking to understand and respond to the evolving political landscape of the EU.

Abstract

Rechtspopulistische Parteien haben ihre Wählerunterstützung und Präsenz in der Europäischen Union (EU) deutlich ausgebaut, wie die Europawahl 2024 gezeigt hat. Trotz gemeinsamer ideologischer Merkmale wie Euroskeptizismus, Nationalismus und eine kritische Haltung gegenüber Supranationalität, organisierten sich diese Parteien nach der Wahl in drei unterschiedliche rechte Fraktionen im Europäischen Parlament. Diese Arbeit untersucht, inwieweit drei ausgewählte rechtspopulistische Parteien aus verschiedenen nationalen Kontexten und Fraktionszugehörigkeiten - Fratelli d'Italia, Ungarns Fidesz und die Alternative für Deutschland - in ihren Positionen zur europäischen Integration in den Bereichen Klima und Sicherheit übereinstimmen oder voneinander abweichen, wobei auch wirtschaftliche Aspekte sowie Implikationen für die Zukunft der europäischen Integration analysiert werden. Die Studie kombiniert Populismustheorie, liberalen Intergouvernementalismus und Neofunktionalismus als theoretische Linsen und wendet eine qualitative vergleichende Fallstudienmethode an, die auf der Analyse von Parteiprogrammen, parteilichen Stellungnahmen, dokumentierten Reden und Interviews sowie Forschungsberichten beruht. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass alle drei Parteien eine Vertiefung der EU-Integration in den Bereichen Klima und Sicherheit ablehnen, die Bedeutung nationaler Souveränität betonen und sich gegen zentralisierte Finanzierungsmechanismen der EU aussprechen. Zwar herrscht Einigkeit in der Kritik am europäischen Green Deal, doch in der Außenpolitik zeigen sich Unterschiede, insbesondere bezüglich des Verhältnisses zu Russland und der Unterstützung der Ukraine. Auf Grundlage dieser Befunde entwickelt die Arbeit verschiedene Szenarien für die zukünftige Entwicklung der europäischen Integration, die von unkoordinierter Blockade und Fragmentierung bis hin zur Bildung eines koordinierten rechtspopulistischen Blocks reichen. Die Ergebnisse sind besonders relevant für politische Entscheidungsträger:innen und Wissenschaftler:innen, die die sich wandelnde politische Landschaft der EU besser verstehen und darauf reagieren möchten.

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List of Abbreviations

AfD.....	<i>Alternative for Germany</i>
CAP.....	<i>Common Agricultural Policy</i>
CFSP.....	<i>Common Foreign and Security Policy</i>
CSDP.....	<i>Common Security and Defence Policy</i>
EC.....	<i>European Community</i>
ECR.....	<i>European Conservatives and Reformists</i>
ECSC.....	<i>European Coal and Steel Community</i>
EEC.....	<i>European Economic Community</i>
EFTA.....	<i>European Free Trade Association</i>
EGD.....	<i>European Green Deal</i>
EP.....	<i>European Parliament</i>
EPP.....	<i>European People's Party</i>
ESN.....	<i>European Sovereign Nations</i>
EU.....	<i>European Union</i>
FdI.....	<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i>
ID.....	<i>Identity and Democracy</i>
MEPs.....	<i>Members of the EP</i>
NATO.....	<i>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</i>
PfE.....	<i>Patriots for Europe</i>
US.....	<i>United States</i>

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The European Union (EU) has long been regarded as one of the most ambitious political, economic and social integration projects in modern history that aims at enhancing cohesion and fostering unity, stability and prosperity among its member states (Treude, 2024, pp. 11-13). Emerging after World War II, it sought to prevent future conflicts, promote economic cooperation and strengthen peace in Europe, while also upholding “democracy, human rights, and the rule of law” (Aktas, 2024, p. 591) as fundamental principles. However, over the past few decades, the rise of right-wing populist movements across several EU member states has posed significant challenges to the integration process. Following World War II, these right-wing parties lost credibility due to their connections with fascism and nationalism, but from the 1980s onward, they have steadily regained support, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Today, they are among the most influential political groups in a third of European nations, signalling a significant transformation rather than a passing phase or a temporary trend. They have expanded their political presence across the EU and secured positions at local, national and EU levels (Aktas, 2024; Henke & Maher, 2021; Mudde, 2014a).

The outcome of the 2024 European elections, that took place from 6th to 9th June 2024, has reinforced the debate about the role of right-wing populist parties in the EU, as the election results highlight a notable shift toward these parties in various EU member states, where they gained significant voter support. Especially in countries like Italy, Hungary and Germany the leading right-wing parties Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), Fidesz and Alternative for Germany (AfD) achieved strong election results and emerged as the strongest political force in nearly each case. After the election, the right-wing parties in the European Parliament (EP) reorganized and are now divided into three political groups: the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the newly founded Patriots for Europe (PfE) and the newly established European Sovereign Nations (ESN), which means that the former Identity and Democracy (ID) group no longer exists (European Parliament, 2024a; Ivaldi & Zankina, 2024). The three groups are situated to the right of the conservative centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and are classified as part of the right-wing spectrum (Kantola et al., 2022, p. 7). They unite parties that are considered nationalist and Eurosceptic, with a critical stance toward supranational governance, including the previously mentioned parties FdI, Fidesz, and the AfD (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, pp. 1-7). This development affects not only political unity, but also important

policy areas such as climate and security, as these are heavily dependent on European cooperation and integration (Treude, 2024, p. 45).

Despite the growing body of theoretical literature on this topic, research is divided on whether right-wing populist parties hinder European integration by promoting, for example, nationalism or adapt pragmatically within EU institutions, with possible variation across parties and policy areas. While studies have examined past electoral gains of right-wing populists at national level and in the EP (Brack & Startin, 2015; Carrieri et al., 2023), little research has systematically analysed the recent electoral shifts. The 2024 European elections led to a reorganisation of right-wing parties into different political groups, however, there is still limited empirical research on whether this division reflects substantive differences in their positions on European integration, or whether it is primarily the result of strategic or political considerations.

This study seeks to fill this gap by analysing the positions of three concrete party examples on European integration in the fields of climate and security, with a particular emphasis on their positions regarding key economic and fiscal policy issues, including EU spending and questions of financial sovereignty in these areas. It should be noted that unless otherwise specified, ‘climate’ also includes energy and environmental policy, and that ‘security’ covers aspects of foreign and defence policy. For reasons of readability, these broader areas will simply be referred to as ‘climate’ and ‘security’ throughout the text. The empirical analysis focuses on three prominent right-wing populist parties FdI in Italy, Fidesz in Hungary and the AfD in Germany. All selected parties have recently achieved strong electoral results. Fidesz and FdI won their respective national elections and currently form the government, while the AfD also recorded substantial gains and became the second strongest party in Germany (Aktas, 2024, pp. 591-593; The Federal Returning Officer, 2025). These cases were also selected to reflect variation in political and national contexts, group affiliation in the EP and regional diversity within the EU by including Southern, Western and East-Central EU member states. FdI currently leads the government in one of the EU’s founding countries in Southern Europe, while Fidesz has been in power for many years in post-socialist East-Central Europe. The AfD, on the other hand, is a major opposition party in one of the EU’s core member states in Western Europe (Aktas, 2024, pp. 592-593; Arzheimer, 2023, p. 140; Publications Office of the European Union, n.d., 2019, 2021; Vachudova, 2020, p. 318). The motivation behind this research therefore lies in the increasing relevance of right-wing populist parties, which could have a lasting impact not only on the national, but also on European dynamics, especially with regard to the EU.

1.2 Research questions and objectives

The political rightward shifts, with right-wing populist parties gaining increasing presence in various national governments and the EP, pose potential threats to cohesion as well as shared policies and raise pressing questions about the future of European integration, particularly in crucial policy areas, such as climate and security policy. This research is therefore guided by the following two research questions:

- (1) How do the right-wing populist parties Fratelli d'Italia, Fidesz and Alternative for Germany from different European Parliament groups agree or diverge in their policy positions on European integration in the areas of climate and security policy?

This first research question serves as the foundation of the thesis and aims to systematically compare the positions of three influential right-wing populist parties on European integration in two politically sensitive areas. The objective is to identify alignments or divergences in their approaches and to assess whether they reflect broader patterns of ideological or national differences. This comparison should also help to clarify, whether the right-wing landscape in the EU is marked more by common ground or internal fragmentation.

- (2) What are the potential implications of these policy positions for European integration in these areas?

The second question addresses, what the identified positions might mean for the direction of European integration in the areas of climate and security. The goal is not to predict political outcomes, but rather to reflect on the potential tensions, obstacles or shifts these positions might pose and to develop possible future scenarios.

In conclusion, this thesis aims to contribute to a better understanding of the positions of selected right-wing populist parties in the EU on European integration in the areas of climate and security, especially in light of the increased voter support for right-wing parties in the 2024 European elections. By focusing on the content and coherence of their political positions, the study offers insights into current patterns of agreement and division among these actors, which not only operate in different national contexts but also within separate political groups in the EP. This topic is of critical relevance, as the growing power of right-wing populist parties could threaten core values of the EU and impact established policy frameworks, particularly in areas that require collective action. Understanding these positions is important for policymakers and political institutions to assess potential challenges to EU integration in specified areas and enable more informed and strategic responses. The following goals guide the analysis:

- Examine the electoral success of the right-wing populist parties FdI, Fidesz and AfD in the recent national and 2024 European elections
- Analyse and compare their political positions on EU integration processes in the policy areas of climate and security and identify common trends and national differences
- Provide insights that may support policymakers and EU institutions in understanding and responding to emerging challenges by developing possible future scenarios

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into five main chapters. Following this introduction, which outlined the research questions, objectives and relevance of the study, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework. It begins with the conceptualization of populism and right-wing populism, including a discussion of how these terms relate to or differ from associated concepts such as the far right, right-wing extremism, fascism and post-fascism. The chapter then explores the key drivers behind the rise of right-wing populism in the European context. Subsequently, it addresses the relationship between right-wing populism and European integration, with a focus on the development of European integration, the role of Euroscepticism within right-wing populism and the positioning of these parties in central EU policy areas. The chapter concludes by examining the role of right-wing populism in the context of the 2024 European elections and how the results have changed the strength and composition of right-wing groups in the EP.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach and the reason for this choice. It explains the research design, which is a comparative case study, and justifies the case selection of the three right-wing parties FdI in Italy, Fidesz in Hungary and the AfD in Germany and the two policy areas climate and security. The chapter also explains the data collection process and describes how this data is analysed using qualitative content analysis following Mayring's approach.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings and discussion. First, each case is examined individually with regard to the positions of the selected parties on European integration in the areas of climate and security. The second part of the chapter consists of a cross-case comparison that highlights similarities and differences between the parties. It also considers the consequences of these findings for the potential unity of the European right and discusses what this means for the future of European integration by developing possible future scenarios.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings, reflecting on their practical and theoretical implications as well as their limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 The rise of right-wing populism in the EU

2.1.1 Conceptualization of populism

Populism is a much-discussed concept in both political debate and academic research, but it remains difficult to define clearly. Although numerous theoretical approaches have been developed, a universally accepted definition is still lacking (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2021, pp. 111,123). One widely held view is the so-called ‘chameleon theory’, which sees populism as a flexible phenomenon that adapts its form and content to varying ideological and cultural contexts. This adaptability contributes to the broad application of the term across the political spectrum, as it is used for both left-wing and right-wing parties, movements and actors (Taggart, 2004, pp. 275-276). A central academic challenge has therefore been to develop a consistent conceptual framework, that captures the core characteristics of populism while distinguishing it from other political ideologies. After outlining its historical development and different approaches to define populism, this thesis adopts a working definition that serves as the basis for the following analysis, with a particular focus on right-wing populism in Europe.

Historical development of populism

The term itself derives from the Latin *populus*, meaning ‘the people’ and has historically been used to describe diverse political movements across time and regions. It was first used in a political context in the 19th century, particularly in the United States (US), when Andrew Jackson presented himself as a representative of ordinary people against the political elites in Washington, a populist stance that played a key role in his electoral success as president (Heinisch et al., 2021, pp. 19-20). Jackson's approach was an early example of populist rhetoric, that emphasised a direct link between the leader and ‘the people’ and challenged traditional institutions. The later *People's Party* in the 1890s, which emerged from the growing unrest among indebted farmers living in economic hardship, also took up this populist political style and fought for the rights of ordinary citizens against banks and industrialists. Populism also has its roots in Russia, where the *Narodnichestvo* movement emerged around the same time in the second half of the 19th century. This movement saw the peasantry as the true people of the nation and turned against the tsarist system and Western-style capitalism (Campani & Pajnik, 2016, pp. 14-18; Tarragoni, 2024, pp. 48-50). In Latin America, populism gained importance in the middle of the 20th century during times of major social and economic changes, for example, through charismatic leaders, like Juan Perón in Argentina or Getúlio Vargas in Brazil. These leaders

appealed to urban workers and the new middle classes and promised them social reforms and national development, while also aiming to reduce foreign dependency from international economic powers. Often, however, they ruled in an authoritarian manner. Unlike in the US, where farmers resisted modernisation, Latin American populists pushed for industrialisation and stronger state control to modernise their countries (Campani & Pajnik, 2016, pp. 19-20; Heinisch et al., 2021, p. 20; Tarragoni, 2024, pp. 48-52). These early forms of populism already showed that the term can refer to very different political goals, depending on the context, and was not necessarily viewed negatively at the time (Campani & Pajnik, 2016, pp. 25-26). In Europe, the term populism only became established comparatively late and played a rather subordinate role for much of the 20th century, associated with fringe movements. In the 1940s and 1950s, for example, there were movements such as *Poujadism* in France or *Qualunquismo* in Italy, which attracted attention primarily through the rejection of political elites, but quickly lost influence again. It was only from the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, that populism began to be used more frequently in political and academic debates to describe European political movements and parties, but often with a negative undertone (Campani & Pajnik, 2016, pp. 22-26; Heinisch et al., 2021, pp. 19-20).

These historical examples highlight the flexibility of the term and contribute to the difficulties in clearly defining populism. Despite differences in ideology and context, the cases presented share a common pattern, as they are rooted in an idealised idea of a unified community called the 'heartland' and mobilise this idea of 'the people' in opposition to established elites and institutions (Taggart, 2004, pp. 273-275). This shared pattern reflects a core characteristic of populism, which can be summarised as follows: “The common thread populism represents in its various manifestations is the rejection of societal and political elites.” (Heinisch et al., 2021, p. 19).

Approaches to populism

When discussing populism, the main question is whether it should be seen as a political strategy, a discursive style or as an ideology, meaning a world view, in its own right. In political science, three major conceptual approaches have emerged to address this question: the strategic approach (Weyland, 2017), the stylistic approach (Moffitt, 2016) and the ideational approach (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde, 2017).

From the perspective of the strategic approach, populism is described as a mode of political practice, in which a leader attempts to gain and maintain political power by mobilising large

and mostly unorganized groups of supporters directly, rather than through traditional institutional channels. A central characteristic is therefore the charismatic leader, who stands at the centre and deliberately bypasses institutions, like parties, in order to expand his own power. He presents himself as the embodiment of the general will of ‘the people’ and uses personalised, direct communication and mobilisation strategies to gain support and establish a close relationship with his followers (Weyland, 2017). This approach is useful to understand how populist leaders operate in practice and how they mobilise support, but it tends to downplay the role of parties, which is why it is not suitable for this thesis.

The stylistic approach offers a different lens through which to understand populism. This approach views populism as a political style that is characterised by distinctive communication and mobilisation strategies, such as specific styles of speech, emotionalization, simplified language or provocative rhetoric to mobilise against the established elites. In particular, the performative elements of populist action are emphasised in this approach (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Jagers and Walgrave (2007) add, that political actors present themselves as close to the ordinary people by constantly talking about them. Through this communicative style, they try to establish a sense of identification and emotional connection with citizens in order to gain their trust and political support. The continuous reference to the people is key in this dynamic, as “[w]ithout reference to the people, populism is simply unthinkable.” (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 323). Although the stylistic approach is valuable for identifying rhetorical patterns, it focuses primarily on how populism is expressed rather than the underlying ideas, which is not a sufficient factor of investigation.

Alongside the two previously discussed approaches, a third perspective has gained prominence in academic debates: the ideational approach. Mudde (2004) has played a key role in shaping the scholarly understanding of populism, defining it

“as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

According to Mudde (2004, p. 544; 2017, p. 30), populism is as describes as a ‘thin-centred ideology’, that lacks a comprehensive worldview and therefore often leans on ‘thick’ ideologies, such as nationalism or socialism. Other scholars, such as Stanley (2008), also argue that

“its thin nature means that it is unable to stand alone as a practical political ideology: it lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution to crucial political questions” (Stanley, 2008, p. 95).

This so-called ideational approach has been widely adopted and cited in the literature. Building on this definition, the ideational approach identifies three core features of populist thought, which are the appeal to ‘the people’ as a pure and uniform collective, the framing of ‘the elite’ as a corrupt and self-interested group, and a dualistic moral worldview that sees politics as a struggle between good and evil. While these elements are sometimes debated, they generally form the core structure of populism, regardless of whether it is left- or right-wing in orientation (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde, 2004, 2017). J.-W. Müller (2016) adds a crucial dimension by emphasizing that populists reject not only elitism, but also pluralism, and see their political opponents and their opinions as not legitimate, which threatens democratic principles. This exclusionary belief that only they represent the people further differentiates populist actors from conventional parties.

However, as already indicated, this approach has also been criticised. Some scholars point out that the vagueness of key concepts like ‘the people’ makes the approach difficult to operationalise in empirical research and argue that it often overlooks the flexible context-specific nature of how populism is constructed in different political and cultural settings. Moreover, the sharp opposition between the morally superior people and the evil elite has been seen as too simplistic, as it risks oversimplifying complex political realities and ignore the diversity within both groups, since it ignores the reality that many populist parties speak to a wide range of diverse social groups. Finally, the approach is criticised for reducing populism to a fixed ideology, overlooking its strategic and context-dependent nature (Katsambekis, 2022, p. 54-60).

Despite this weakness, the ideational approach with its main representative Mudde (2017) has proven to be particularly influential, as it enables to capture the fundamental ideological and content-related characteristics of right-wing populist parties, as well as their core beliefs and political positions. It is highlighted, that “[f]irst and foremost, it is increasingly dominating studies of European populism, particularly in empirical political science.” (Mudde, 2017, p. 38). In addition, the concept is considered as ‘travelable’, meaning it can be applied to a wide variety of cases across different countries and time periods without losing its core meaning, which is why it is widely used in comparative research (Mudde, 2017, p. 38). It is therefore seen as one of the theoretical foundations of this thesis, as it provides a common conceptual lens through which the populist orientation of the selected parties can be understood.

2.1.2 Conceptualization of right-wing populism

Populism is diverse and appears across the party system, combining with various more comprehensive host or ‘thick’ ideologies to shape different political actors in the European political

landscape. These differences result from how the basic ideas of populism are mixed with the deeper beliefs of the individual parties. While populists commonly oppose elites and establishments, especially in response to perceived democratic shortcomings, left-wing populists differ from right-wing populist, depending on its contents and political context (Ivaldi et al., 2017; Loew & Faas, pp. 496-497, 2019; March, 2017). Left-wing populists typically characterize ‘the people’ in social and economic terms, viewing it as the disadvantaged majority that fights inequality. While they tend to criticise social inequality and focus on opposing economic power, their populism is more inclusive and focused on social justice (Ivaldi et al., 2017; March, 2017). In contrast, right-wing populists emphasize cultural identity, often depicting ‘the people’ as an ethnically or nationally homogeneous group that is under threat from outsiders. As a result, right-wing populism tends to be exclusionary and nationalist, appealing to national sovereignty (March, 2017; Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Right-wing populism combines ideas from both populism and right-wing ideology and is mainly characterized by a few key elements, which will be presented in the following.

The exclusionary logic is often rooted in nativism, an ideology that believes that the state should only be made up of people of the native group, and that elements that are not native are a threat to the unity and identity of the nation (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). While nativism shares some ground with nationalism, it goes further in its exclusivity, because it sees immigrants, religious minorities or multiculturalism as dangers to cultural cohesion and therefore excludes “liberal forms of nationalism” (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). Newth (2023) adds that nativism should be understood as a xenophobic and racist discourse. In contrast to populism, which is focused on a vertical conflict between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, he claims that nativism uses a horizontal logic to distinguish insiders from outsiders based on factors like religion, culture or ethnicity. Given that migrants are viewed as culturally incompatible or unwilling to assimilate, immigration becomes a particularly important issue in this context. The primary enemy in this context is often identified as Muslim immigration or Islam itself, as a broader cultural and religious force (Kallis, 2018, pp. 42-44).

Alongside populism and nativism, authoritarianism is frequently identified as a third core element, especially for populist radical right parties. In the influential framework proposed by (Mudde, 2007, pp. 22-23), it is defined as a central ideological component within his maximum definition. Authoritarianism denotes a preference for a strictly ordered society, often supported by strong leadership, law-and-order politics and a tendency to punish those, who challenge authority. In this understanding, it is not necessarily considered anti-democratic. However, this view has been challenged by scholars who argue that right-wing populism does not necessarily

rely on authoritarian principles (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017, pp. 910-911). For example, Lütjen (2022) argues that modern right-wing populism also contains anti-authoritarian tendencies and emphasizes, for example, its distrust of traditional elites and institutions. Right-wing populists frequently portray their politics as an effort of self-empowerment, claiming that ‘the people’ are the real source of political legitimacy. In this view, their rejection of established hierarchies and promotion of direct representation reflect a bottom-up understanding of power, as amplifiers of the popular will, which stands in contrast to the centralized authority typically associated with authoritarian ideologies.

Figure 1 illustrates a theoretical model of the ideological structure of right-wing populism, which distinguishes between a ‘thin’ and a ‘thick’ ideology. The ‘thin’ ideology forms the common core of right-wing populist parties and includes a distinct people-centrism and a strong rejection of political elites and institutions. This core is complemented by a number of elements of ‘thick ideology, including nativism and nationalism. Additionally, the diagram includes authoritarianism, anti-egalitarianism and exclusionism as further ideological tendencies, that are linked to right-wing populism by dashed lines. Anti-egalitarianism refers to opposition to universal equality, while exclusionism targets specific social groups, often manifesting as anti-feminism or rejection of LGBTQ+ rights. This suggests that these elements are not core components, but are sometimes adopted by these parties in practice, depending on the political context and the goals of specific parties. Thus, the model illustrates that right-wing populism should be viewed as a flexible construct with a constant core and variable supplementary components rather than as a closed ideology (Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2024, pp. 3-6).

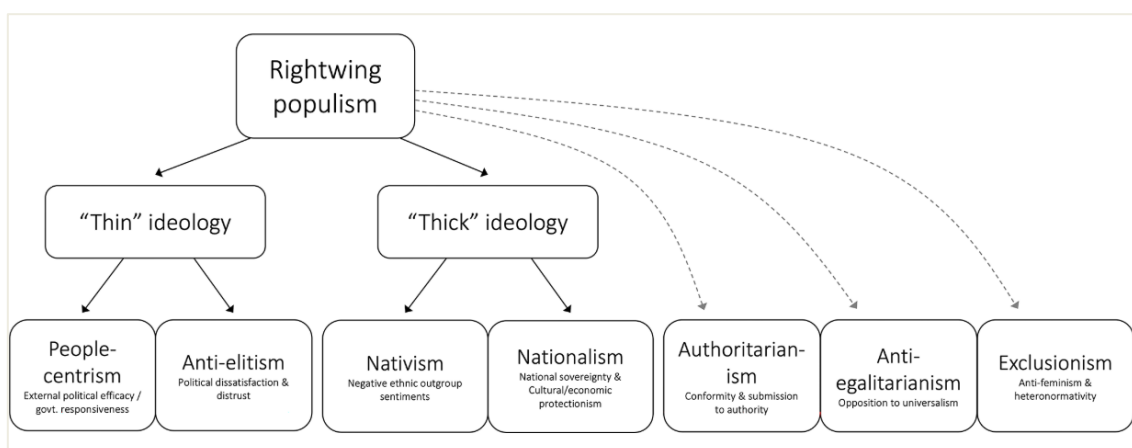


Figure 1: Theoretical model of right-wing populism (Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2024, p. 7)

Regarding the academic debate on right-wing politics, various labels for the same groups and parties have emerged since the 1980s, because it is widely acknowledged that there is no single, universally accepted definition. While academic literature often distinguishes between terms

like ‘(populist) radical right’, ‘right-wing populist’, ‘far right’ and ‘extreme right’, these definitions are not always applied consistently. This can lead to confusion, as scholars use different terms to describe similar political actors (Aktas, 2024, pp. 595-596; Minkenberg, 2018, pp. 338-341, 344; Mudde, 2007, pp. 11-12; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017, p. 910). It is acknowledged that “[t]he popularity of certain terms fluctuates with the political climate” (Aktas, 2024, p. 596). The term ‘right-wing populism’ is widely recognised, especially in German research. Even if it does not clearly describe a specific party family, it is well suited as the most comprehensive term for various forms of the right-wing populist spectrum, that includes, for example, the populist radical right and neoliberal populists, who share anti-elitist views but differ in how radical or nationalist they are (Mudde, 2007, pp. 30, 47). As this paper focuses on three right-wing parties that are represented in different political groups within the EP, the use of this broader term ‘right-wing populist’ ensures a consistent, yet flexible analytical framework, that provides a common ground for analysing their positions on European integration. According to a recent study from Aktas (2024, p. 596) this expression is also currently among the most frequently used ones to describe these parties, which justifies the choice. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the term ‘right-wing populist’ and the criticism it has received. While the term offers a useful framework for comparing ideologically diverse parties, it is often seen as too vague and can sometimes obscure important distinctions in ideological depth and orientation within a party family (Minkenberg, 2018). For this reason, a more precise distinction between right-wing populism and related concepts such as the far right, right-wing extremism, fascism and post-fascism will be made in the following with a focus on the European context.

2.1.3 Differentiation from related concepts: the far right, right-wing extremism, fascism and post-fascism

Mudde (2014b, pp. 98-99) sees the ‘far right’ as a broad category that covers different types like ‘(populist) radical right’ and ‘extreme right’. According to him, the key difference lies in their attitudes toward democracy, since (populist) radical right parties accept democracy and democratic procedures, but oppose liberal values like pluralism and rights of minorities, while the extreme right goes further and rejects democracy entirely (see Figure 2). However, he also recognises that given the political sensitivity of the terms ‘far right’ and ‘populism’ there will probably never be complete agreement on how to define them. While the conceptual distinction remains important, recent empirical developments have, for example, shown increasing overlap between the two strands, particularly in terms of rhetoric, narratives and political strategies. This shows that the boundaries between the concepts are fluid, which is why broader and more

abstract terms like ‘far right’ are increasingly used to capture the complexity of current developments (Pirro, 2023, p. 107).

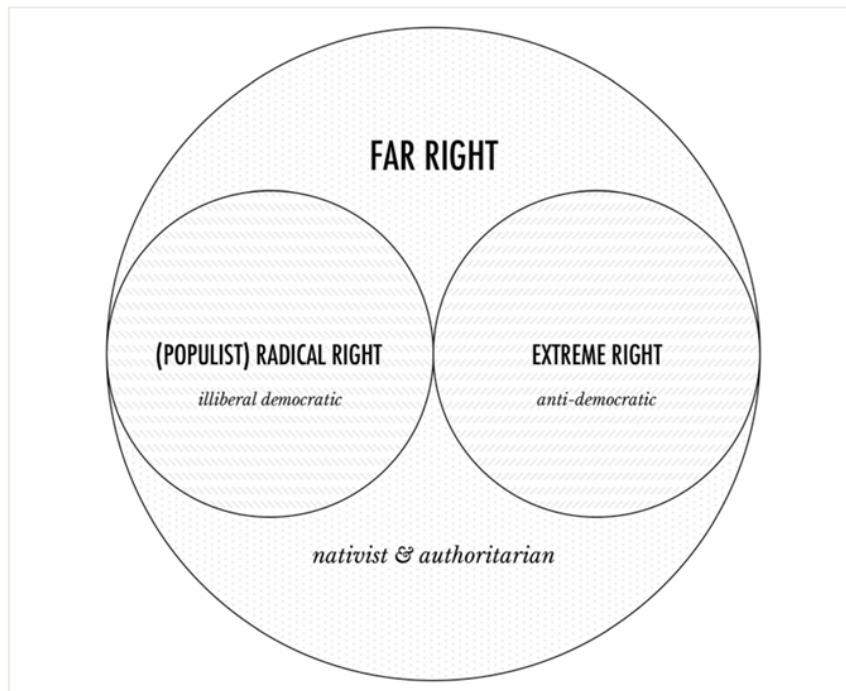


Figure 2: Conceptual distinction within the far right (Pirro, 2023, p. 106)

Some scholars, however, emphasize, that right-wing extremism still needs to be seen as a separate concept, especially because it clearly rejects the basic principles of democracy. As Carter (2018, p. 174) shows, “authoritarianism, anti-democracy, and an exclusionary and/or a holistic kind of nationalism are defining properties of right-wing extremism/radicalism”. Other features, like xenophobia, racism or populism often appear together with it, but they are not essential for the definition. Moreover, a simple but useful distinction is that right-wing extremist parties are fundamentally anti-system, position themselves against the democratic order itself, whereas right-wing populist parties are primarily anti-elite and target the political elite (Leiß, 2012, p. 196). However, there may be exceptions here too, as seen in Hungary, for example (Busch, 2019, p. 129).

A central debate deals with the extent to which there are connections to the concept of fascism, which can be seen as a historically radical form of right-wing extremism. While right-wing populism and fascism are sometimes mentioned in the same analytical context, especially since these parties continue to draw on some similar ideological elements, it is essential to distinguish between the two (Ziegler, 2021, pp. 16-19, 31-32). Fascism, in its historical sense, was a revolutionary, extreme nationalist and anti-democratic ideology aimed at total societal transformation through violence, exclusion and state control. It is rooted in a specific time and political

function, primarily linked to the interwar period of the early 20th century and found its first and most formative expression in the authoritarian regimes of that time, especially in Mussolini's Italy and later in Nazi Germany (Burni, 2019, pp. 125-126; Eley, 2021, pp. 7-11; Ziegler, 2021, p. 26). Scholars like Griffin (1993, p. xi) have proposed a generic definition of fascism as 'palinogenetic ultranationalism', which refers to "a revolutionary form of nationalism, one which sets out to be a political, social and ethical revolution" (Griffin, 1993, p. xi) and that revolves around the idea of a country's rebirth after a period of perceived decline. The main difference to contemporary right-wing populism, according to his definition, can be seen in the fact that fascism was revolutionary and more aggressive, seeking to completely transform the political system in order to create a new authoritarian national order, whereas right-wing populism is rather reformist and aims to change the system from within (Burni, 2019, p. 127; Ziegler, 2021, pp. 20, 26, 31). However, although there are certain overlaps in a weakened form, the concept of fascism remains highly politicised, historically burdened and therefore not consistently applied across contemporary contexts (Eley, 2021, pp. 2-6).

Nevertheless, recent empirical developments suggest growing ideological overlaps between the right and fascism, especially through the lens of post-fascism. As Ortiz Cabrero and Sierp (2024) point out, Italy has become a prime example where the post-fascist party FdI successfully participates in government while downplaying its fascist roots and employing mnemonic strategies to reshape national history. This subtle reframing, often expressed through references to cultural and national identity while deliberately avoiding direct references to historical fascism, allows far-right actors to distance themselves from explicitly fascist labels while still appealing to similar emotions, symbols and values. By using history in a selective way, they try to make their exclusionary views seem more acceptable. They do this for strategic reasons to gain wider acceptance and avoid the negative associations that come with openly fascist beliefs (Brown & Newth, 2024, pp. 10, 12-14; Ortiz Cabrero & Sierp, 2024, pp. 9-11). The concept of 'post-fascism', as outlined by Traverso (2019, pp. 4-7), is used to describe this ideological legacy of fascism in a transformed, contemporary form that has adapted to democratic norms, but that "should also be distinguished from neofascism, that is, the attempt to perpetuate and regenerate an old fascism" (Traverso, 2019, p. 6). Post-fascist movements do not openly identify with classical fascism, but retain elements of its political worldview such as nationalism and xenophobia (Brown & Newth, 2024, p. 4).

Overall, it is important to distinguish between illiberal populist actors who operate within the democratic framework and extremist, anti-democratic actors who seek to destroy that framework to understand Europe's contemporary right. In this thesis, the term 'right-wing populism'

is used to describe parties that are characterised by populist ideas opposing ‘the people’ to ‘the elite’, with the latter often identified with the EU, while formally recognising the basic principles of democracy, like elections, but rejecting certain elements of liberal democracy. Accordingly, FdI, AfD and Fidesz are regarded as right-wing populist parties, although their respective proximity to extreme-right or post-fascist positions is discussed later on in a differentiated manner.

2.1.4 Key drivers of right-wing populism

Research on right-wing populism in Europe has expanded significantly in recent decades, particularly in response to its growing electoral success. Many scholars in political science have explored how structural and cultural factors contribute to the growth of these parties and have identified central patterns in their ideological foundations and rejection of common themes like globalisation, supranational governance and traditional party politics (Aktas, 2024; Brause & Kinski, 2024; Carrieri et al., 2023; Gross, 2023; Mudde, 2007; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017; Sandrin, 2021; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024). Since there are some differences between the reasons people support right-wing and left-wing populist groups, the following analysis focuses exclusively on the explanatory factors associated with right-wing populist voting behaviour.

A dominant strand of the literature examines the economic drivers behind the rise of right-wing populism, where economic insecurity and inequality (Sandrin, 2021), regional disparities (Schraff & Pontusson, 2024) as well as globalization-related anxieties (Podobnik et al., 2017) are often cited as key factors. Economic disparities and regional inequalities play a crucial role and are often driven by globalisation. In wealthier core countries of the EU, the residents of economically weaker regions often compare themselves to the more affluent areas within their own country, which fosters frustration and support for right-wing populist parties, as seen, for example, in the East-West divide of Germany. In contrast, in peripheral EU member states, comparisons are more likely drawn with the richer core countries, which reinforces the feeling of being left behind and further increases populist sentiment, as voters often feel neglected by the metropolitan elites and distant EU institutions (Sandrin, 2021, pp. 228-230; Schraff & Pontusson, 2024). According to Han (2016), when inequality rises, support for the radical right grows among lower-income groups. It is also argued that declining job security and wage stagnation have fuelled a sense of economic grievance among voters, particularly in working-class communities (Bergh & Kärnä, 2022).

These findings are often linked to the socio-economic backgrounds of voters. Right-wing populist parties in Europe find particular support among people from lower socio-economic classes,

such as the low-educated and low-qualified, the unemployed or workers, who see themselves as ‘losers of globalisation’, feel left behind and therefore reject modernization-driven change. Their support is based less on objective poverty or marginalisation than on the subjective feeling of relative disadvantage, but this perceived disadvantage can manifest itself in mistrust of the political system and a shift towards nationalist positions. Therefore, the explanatory value of economic and socio-economic variables for understanding right-wing populist voting behaviour is considered limited, as the effects are rather indirect (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Grande, 2008). Instead, many studies show that voting decisions are often culturally motivated and characterised by ideological orientations.

One of the most prominent explanations is the cultural backlash hypothesis, developed by Inglehart and Norris (2016). They argue that right-wing populist parties are driven by fear of cultural change and perceived threats to traditional values, national identity and cultural homogeneity, particularly among older and socially conservative voters, as younger generations become increasingly liberal. However, more recent research, such as Schäfer (2022), disagrees with the Cultural Backlash Hypothesis. His findings provide little evidence for a generational divide in cultural values and show that in some cases “[y]ounger citizens are more likely than older ones to vote for authoritarian-populist parties [...]” (Schäfer, 2022, p. 1991). Overall, however, many studies show that these new findings do not invalidate cultural and ideological explanations. The influx of migrants and the perceived erosion of national identity and traditional values have still created an environment in which populist leaders successfully mobilize voters through nationalist, anti-immigration and Eurosceptic rhetoric (Aktas, 2024; Podobnik et al., 2017; Sandrin, 2021, pp. 231-232). Especially, the refugee crisis in 2015 and subsequent immigration waves paved the way for right-wing populists across Europe, because they framed immigration as a security threat and a cultural invasion (Gross, 2023, pp. 492-494; Podobnik et al., 2017; Ünal Eriş & Öner, 2021).

A key unifying element is also the role of political trust and institutional dissatisfaction. Research highlights that declining trust in established mainstream parties, parliaments and supra-national institutions contributed to the rise of these movements, with right-wing populist parties successfully positioning themselves as anti-establishment forces, that represent ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ (Kriesi, 2020; Lubbers & Coenders, 2017; Sandrin, 2021, p. 232; Vachudova, 2021, p. 474). This argument is further supported by scholars like Gidron and Hall (2020) who argue that such support is also rooted in social marginalization, as individuals who feel disconnected from societal norms and networks are more likely to reject mainstream politics. Finally, Euroscepticism is often seen as a key driver of support for right-wing populist parties and a

central element of the broader backlash against European integration, as the EU is commonly associated with immigration, multiculturalism and elite-driven policies (Kriesi, 2020).

Beyond the mentioned factors, the success of right-wing populist parties is also influenced by changes in public discourse and the salience of issues, meaning how much attention and importance the public assigns to certain topics. Recent research shows that European integration in particular is proving to be strategically advantageous because, unlike the migration issue, it is less politicised and therefore promises greater success when European integration becomes a highly visible issue in the election campaigns. As mainstream parties engage more in EU-related debates, they inadvertently increase the relevance of the issue and offer the right-wing populists a stronger platform to mobilise support (Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024). Media framing has also reinforced awareness of these issues and the aforementioned public fears and helped populist leaders to position themselves as defenders of the nation. Their provocative rhetoric fits well with media dynamics, which increases their visibility and strengthens their electoral appeal (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017, pp. 914-915).

Together, these explanations offer a multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon. Right-wing populism thrives at the intersection of economic grievances, regional exclusion, cultural fears, political mistrust and media dynamics, while drawing on narratives of resistance against globalization, immigration and European integration. Having outlined the conceptual framework of right-wing populism and reasons for its rise, it is now crucial to examine the relationship between right-wing populist parties and the EU, given that these parties often express a Eurosceptic position and are critical about deeper European integration.

2.2 Right-wing populism and European integration

2.2.1 Origins, development and theories of European integration

The European integration process is characterized by its complexity and continuous evolution, both institutionally and politically (Segers & Van Hecke, 2023, pp. 23-24; Wessels, 2017, pp. 2-4). Since the end of World War II, efforts to unify Europe have aimed at creating a coherent political and economic entity with closer cooperation between states, although there is still no generally recognised definition of 'European integration' (Treude, 2024, p. 11). The project of European integration emerged as part of broader Western strategies to secure stability after the war. Supported by the US through frameworks such as the Marshall Plan, European integration was embedded within a wider Atlantic vision of promoting capitalism, democracy and eco-

conomic interdependence (Segers & Van Hecke, 2023, p. 4). The establishment of early integration projects, like the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 and later the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community in 1958, reflected these ambitions, even though there were competing visions for Europe's future. Alternative paths, like the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) founded in 1960, emphasized looser forms of cooperation and united those Western European states that were not members of the EEC. However, the development of European integration mainly centred around the deeper, institutional cooperation established by the EEC (Segers & Van Hecke, 2023, pp. 2, 5-6; Wessels, 2017, pp. 9-10; Zaharia & Pozneacova, 2020, pp. 54-56).

This growing influence has been accompanied by a progressive development of the EU's institutional framework and was marked by a number of foundational treaties. It started with the Treaty of Paris and the formation of the ECSC, followed by the creation of the EEC through the Treaties of Rome, which came into force in 1958. Over time, the EEC evolved into the European Community (EC) and later into the EU with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. Further milestones, including the Single European Act (1987), the Amsterdam Treaty (1999), the Treaty of Nice (2003) and culminating in the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), successively deepened and broadened the political structure of the EU (Wessels, 2017, pp. 9-10).

Economically, European integration followed a clearly staged and ambitious progression, beginning with the formation of free trade areas, advancing through customs union and the establishment of a common market and ultimately resulting in the creation of an economic and monetary union, that has not yet been fully completed. As integration deepened, it involved the creation of shared institutions, making the boundary between economic and political integration increasingly blurred (Segers & Van Hecke, 2023, pp. 18-19; Treude, 2024, p. 12). Over time, the EU's integration process extended across multiple dimensions and policy fields, moving well beyond purely economic goals. Today, the EU governs an increasing number of key policy areas, including the internal market, the monetary union, foreign policy and justice and home affairs, demonstrating a steady expansion of its political authority (Treude, 2024, pp. 12,14; Wessels, 2017, pp. 2-3). In this thesis, European integration is primarily understood as policy harmonisation in the areas of climate and security, with a particular focus on the tension between EU competences and national sovereignty. However, it should be noted that integration also encompasses other important dimensions. These include legal and institutional deepening, economic convergence, identity building and territorial enlargement (Wessels, 2017, pp. 2-4). Figure 3 illustrates this gradual deepening of the European integration through the development of the EU, in contrast to the EFTA, which has remained an intergovernmental organization.

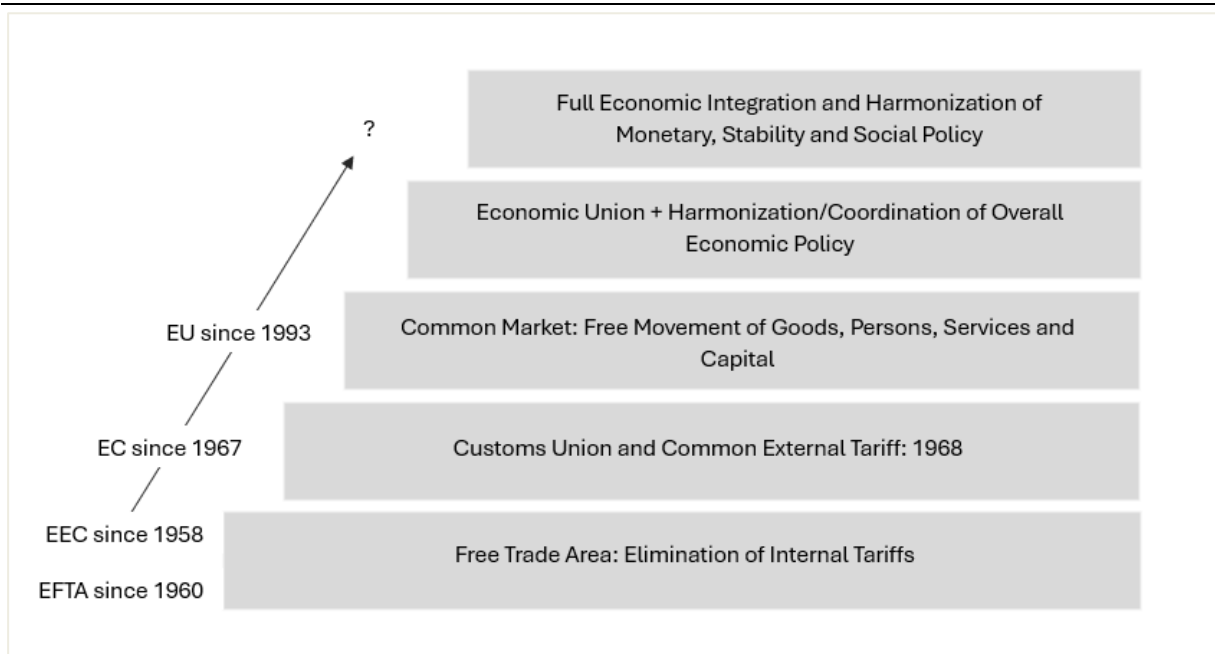


Figure 3: Stages of European Integration (Own illustration based on Treude, 2024, p. 13)

Nowadays, the EU represents a unique form of integration, that combines supranational and intergovernmental elements on the basis of jointly concluded treaties (Zaharia & Pozneacova, 2020, pp. 54-56). The current legal foundation is the Treaty of Lisbon, which forms the EU's primary law since the revision in 2009 and serves as the foundation for further legislative and institutional developments. In the supranational dimension of the EU, member states delegate parts of their sovereignty to joint institutions, so that decisions can be made at the European level by majority vote, even against individual national interests (Treude, 2024, p. 14; Wessels, 2017, pp. 26-27, 31). According to Zaharia and Pozneacova (2020, p.48), one of the aims is thereby to create common political and economic principles to which member states should orientate themselves and adhere to create stability. By definition

“a supranational union represents a type of multinational political union, where negotiated power is delegated to an independent authority by governments of member states, which actions in the interest of the community.” (Zaharia & Pozneacova, 2020, p. 48)

Nevertheless, intergovernmental elements continue to play an important role in the EU's institutional framework. Intergovernmental refers to a form of cooperation in which member states retain their full sovereignty and freedom of decision-making, often requiring unanimous agreement and remains strong in sensitive fields such as foreign and security policy (Treude, 2024, p. 14; Wessels, 2017, pp. 26-28). Institutions, like the European Commission and the EP, embody the supranational character of the Union, as they act largely independently from national

governments, whereas the European Council, for example, illustrates the intergovernmental dimension, providing forums where state leaders negotiate based on national interests (Wessels, 2017, p. 28).

To explain these hybrid dynamics of the EU and European integration in general, a variety of theoretical approaches have been developed over time, including federalism, neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, post functionalism and new intergovernmentalism. These theories differ mainly in how they understand the role of states, institutions and societal actors in the integration process (Bulmer et al., 2020). This thesis draws upon two key theoretical approaches to European integration, particularly *neofunctionalism* and *liberal intergovernmentalism*, which offer contrasting perspectives on the balance between supranational and national influences. *Neofunctionalism* is a theory of regional integration that argues that states are made up of many different actors with competing and changing interests, rather than having one fixed national interest. Integration happens when these actors believe that supranational institutions are better able to realise their goals than their national governments. As a result, supranational institutions gain more power and legitimacy. According to this theory, European integration is seen as a self-reinforcing process, where integration expands naturally as cooperation in one area leads to further integration in related areas. For example, economic interdependence can lead to deeper political cooperation. This dynamic is known as the ‘spill-over effect’ and suggests that once integration has begun, it is difficult to reverse (Haas, 2004, pp. xiv-xv, xxi). *Liberal intergovernmentalism*, on the other hand, offers a state-centred explanation for European integration and suggests that national governments remain the key decision-makers in EU affairs, that steer the integration process according to their own interests. Unlike classical intergovernmentalism, liberal intergovernmentalism explains state preferences not as fixed or given, but as the result of domestic political and economic interests. States define their preferences through internal political processes, negotiate outcomes based on relative power and only create or strengthen EU institutions if it helps to secure and enforce agreements. These institutions are therefore not seen as driving forces, but as tools to support intergovernmental agreements. According to this view, European cooperation only advances when member states agree to it and integration does not progress automatically (Moravcsik, 1993, pp. 480-482; 2020, pp. 3-16). These theoretical perspectives help to understand why European integration remains controversial.

While European integration is often portrayed as a success story of peace, prosperity and progressive unity, there has been criticism from the very beginning that questions the process of

this project and that is reinforced by the rise of right-wing populism (P. Müller & von Hodenberg, 2024, pp. 286-287). Their growing influence in national governments and in the EP could lead to a shift toward a more intergovernmental EU, where states cooperate selectively rather than following a deeper, uniform integration process. Especially, as countries prioritise national interests over common European solutions, further deepening of integration is made more difficult and, in some cases, even actively restricted (Busch, 2019, pp. 129-131). Against this backdrop, the following chapter examines the concept of Euroscepticism in greater detail.

2.2.2 Euroscepticism in right-wing populism

The resurgence of nationalist sentiments in various EU member states has posed a significant challenge to contemporary Europe in recent years. Existing research indicates that the rise of right-wing populism has brought new complexities to the debate of European integration, as many of these parties question supranational governance and prioritise national sovereignty over deeper EU cooperation (Busch, 2019, pp. 129-131; McMahon, 2022, pp. 12-14, 22). Especially, parties on the right have developed a complex and often critical relationship with the EU, so that their stance on European integration has become a central aspect of their political identity (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, pp. 1-2). In policy areas like security and migration, where national control remains strong, there is often political resistance to the transfer of competences to the EU level, with this attitude often shaped by the specific historical and cultural context of a country (Treude, 2024, p. 45). The role of right-wing populist parties in the process of European integration has therefore become an increasingly contested topic in the academic debate.

One of the central features of contemporary right-wing populism in Central and Eastern Europe is a distinct form of Euroscepticism that combines cultural rejection with political and economic criticism of the EU, especially the European integration process. This scepticism aligns with the core themes of right-wing populism by addressing concerns about economic decline, cultural change and political alienation (Carrieri & Vittori, 2021; Habersack & Wegscheider, 2021; Mach, 2022). The EU is often blamed for these issues, “which stems from the perception of the EU as a major driver of immigration, multiculturalism and economic liberalisation, and as a primarily elite-driven project.” (Ivaldi, 2021, p. 220). EU elites are frequently portrayed as distant, self-serving bureaucrats who impose unwanted rules and values on sovereign nations while ignoring the interests of ordinary people. This narrative draws a sharp line between the culturally rooted nations of Europe and a detached EU elite, reinforcing the populist idea of a struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite' (Mach, 2022, pp. 25-26). Across both Central and Eastern

Europe, many right-wing populist parties share therefore a scepticism toward the idea of a more unified EU and “are united by their criticism of EU policies, in particular those concerning security, emigration, multiculturalism, gender equality, the rights of minorities, as well as economic liberalism and the common currency.” (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, p. 1). Their criticism has been intensified by a series of crises and challenges in recent years, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the unresolved refugee issue and the stalled reform of the eurozone (Bosson & von Ondarza, 2024, p. 5; Busch, 2019, p. 129). During the refugee crisis, for instance, migrants were presented as culturally alien and dangerous, and the EU's policy on the distribution of migrants appeared to many as an expression of elitist alienation. Right-wing populist parties portrayed the EU as a threat to national identities and accused the EU elites of imposing a European identity that was incompatible with the traditional, religious and ethnic values of their societies (Bijsmans, 2020, p. 12; Mach, 2022, pp. 24-25).

However, according to recent research, Euroscepticism is not a purely contemporary phenomenon, but rather a recurring aspect in the history of European integration, with right-wing populist parties today continuing and reshaping older patterns of criticism (P. Müller & von Hodenberg, 2024, pp. 286-289). Even among mainstream political players, critical views toward European integration have existed since its early stages. The increase in scepticism is a reflection of larger discussions concerning democratic legitimacy, economic advantage and identity. While such positions are sometimes rooted in ideology, they can also be strategically motivated, used to mobilize voters or respond to public opinion (Bijsmans, 2020, pp. 7-8; P. Müller & von Hodenberg, 2024, pp. 295-296; Van Kessel, 2025, pp. 131-132).

Euroscepticism has evolved into a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, that can take many forms and cannot simply be seen as a rejection of the EU (P. Müller & von Hodenberg, 2024, pp. 288-289, 291-292; Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, p. 1). Scholars commonly distinguish between *hard Euroscepticism*, which completely rejects the idea of European integration and supranational cooperation, and *soft Euroscepticism*, which criticises specific policies or the current direction of the EU. Though this differentiation has been criticized for oversimplifying the complexity of Eurosceptic attitudes, it provides a useful starting point for understanding the range of positions that exist, which can vary from radical opposition to more pragmatic concerns and cautious critique (Bijsmans, 2020, pp. 4-6; Habersack & Wegscheider, 2021, pp. 496-497; Rooduijn & Van Kessel, 2019, p. 3; Van Kessel, 2025, pp. 131-132). Furthermore, it is important to recognise, that soft Euroscepticism can refer to different visions of Europe depending on the political camp. On the one hand, left-wing parties criticise the EU primarily for eco-

conomic reasons and democratic shortcomings. They view the EU as promoting neoliberal policies that limit social justice and redistribution, which means, their criticism is more about how the EU works now and not about the idea of supranational cooperation itself. On the other hand, soft Euroscepticism expressed by right-wing parties often entails a preference for re-nationalisation, mainly for cultural identity and national sovereignty reasons, and is against the EU as a political system. They reject further political integration, supranational governance and liberal values. Although they also speak of ‘reform of the EU’ or ‘alternative visions for Europe’, they tend to mean a return to a loose confederation of states without strong common institutions, whereas left-wing parties favour more democratically legitimised institutions like the EP (Gad et al., 2025; Vasilopoulou, 2018). In the following analysis, the focus will be only on the right-wing form of soft Euroscepticism and its implications for integration dynamics.

Research indicates that among right-wing actors soft Euroscepticism is on the rise, as more parties aim to reform the EU from the inside rather than pursue an exit. Since Brexit, hard Euroscepticism has declined, and Eurosceptic parties now focus their efforts on influencing key policy areas, such as immigration, climate and environment (Jeong, 2024, pp. 23-24). Van Kessel (2025, pp. 128-130), for example, points out that many of these parties are not completely against European integration. Instead, they criticize specific parts of the EU, like immigration policy or loss of national control, while sometimes supporting economic cooperation. He stresses that ‘Europe’ is a flexible idea that these parties use in different ways, often to appear more mainstream or gain legitimacy. Overall, Euroscepticism should be seen as a broad and multidimensional concept that plays an increasingly central role in shaping both party politics and attitudes towards European integration. Following the general discussion of Euroscepticism, the next section explores the relationship between right-wing populism and specific areas of European integration.

2.2.3 Right-wing populism and its role in key policy areas of European integration

As has already become clear, some scholars argue that right-wing populist parties act as obstacles to integration, while others highlight that, despite their opposition to certain EU policies, some right-wing populist parties try to engage with EU institutions to shape policy outcomes in their favour. In this context, scholars also explore how right-wing populist parties position themselves regarding various policy areas of European integration at national and EU-level, such as migration, climate and environmental policy, law and order or health policy (Heinisch et al., 2021, pp. 37-38). The following chapter focuses on the areas of climate and security cooperation, as these are the core policy fields examined in this thesis. In order to understand

the positions of right-wing populist parties in these areas, it is essential to first examine the EU's overarching goals and integration strategies in the fields of climate and security. This provides the basis for reviewing data on how right-wing populist parties respond to, challenge or selectively support European integration in these two fields. The overview focuses on the current and forward-looking objectives of the EU, particularly those that are relevant in 2025 and expected to remain central to the EU's strategic agenda in the coming years. These goals are laid out in important EU strategies and policy documents, highlighting the Union's intention to respond to global challenges through joint, coordinated action.

Regarding climate policy, the EU has the goal to become the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050 (European Commission, n.d.). This ambition is anchored in the European Green Deal (EGD), which was introduced in 2019 and presents

“a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use.” (European Commission, 2019, p. 2)

The EGD serves as a roadmap for transforming the EU economy into a sustainable economy and includes initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote clean energy, advance a circular economy and encourage green building and renovation, among other initiatives. To make the goal of climate neutrality legally binding, the EU adopted the European Climate Law, which sets a defined goal of achieving a minimum 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to the levels in 1990. To achieve this, the EU introduced the ‘Fit for 55’ package, which is a set of policy proposals that aims to align sectors like energy, transport and taxation with the 2030 climate target (European Commission, n.d.; 2019, pp. 3-5). Among its key measures are, for example, the phase-out of cars with internal combustion engine by 2035, the creation of a new carbon pricing mechanism for buildings and road transport, stricter CO₂ emission standards for industries and new regulations on building efficiency (European Commission, 2023). The EP plays a key role in shaping the mentioned climate policies of the EU. For example, during its ninth term (2019–2024), it contributed significantly to the EGD and declared a climate and environmental emergency in 2019 (Kurrer & Petit, 2024, p. 5).

The EU has also defined a set of strategic objectives in the field of foreign and security policy. Guided by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EU aims to uphold international peace and security, promote democracy and human rights, strengthen multilateral cooperation and enhance its role in security and defence (Juncos & Friis, 2022, p. 280). Recent developments, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have prompted the EU to adopt a more assertive stance and use a range of diplomatic tools, including sanctions, to respond to external

threats (Council of the European Union, 2025). The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is a core part of the EU's broader foreign and security agenda. It provides the EU with a framework for coordinating military and civilian missions and for gradually developing a shared European defence capability (EUR-Lex, 2015). However, a key point of disagreement concerns whether security and defence should remain under national control or be further integrated at the EU level (Juncos & Friis, 2022, p. 280). While defence still remains largely inter-governmental, the CSDP supports closer cooperation between member states through initiatives like the Permanent Structured Cooperation, which aim to strengthen military capabilities and encourage joint projects (EUR-Lex, 2015). The Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022, is another initiative that addresses the need for the EU to become a more capable and autonomous security provider by 2030, strengthening its overall security and defence policy. Key objectives include enhancing the EU's ability to act in crises, securing the Union and its citizens against emerging threats, investing in defence capabilities and deepening partnerships with international organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations. These measures aim to bolster the EU's strategic autonomy and its capacity to respond effectively to security challenges, by deepening the defence cooperation among member states (Council of the European Union, 2024).

2.2.3.1 Climate policy

Scholarly discussions increasingly examine the ways in which right-wing populist and far-right parties engage with environmental and climate issues (Caiani & Lubarda, 2024; Forchtner & Lubarda, 2023; Lockwood, 2018; Schaller & Carius, 2019). Most of the research indicates, that in climate policy, these parties may pose a threat to urgently needed global climate actions, since they often oppose ambitious EU climate and energy policies, framing them as threats to national sovereignty (Delin, 2023, p. 81; Kulin et al., 2021, pp. 1111-1112). Studies show that resistance to the EU's climate policies and measures is not due to populism per se, but rather due to the underlying nationalist or even nativist ideology of right-wing populist parties that prioritises sovereignty, economic protectionism and cultural identity over supranational governance and global cooperation (Kulin et al., 2021, pp. 1115-1117; Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2024, pp. 14-17). While nationalism and nativism are seen as the main reasons for the right-wing parties' climate scepticism, the populist rhetorical style also plays an important role. Populist parties portray environmental protection as a technocratic, elitist project that marginalises 'the people'. They question the legitimacy of scientific expertise, EU governance structures and global institutions, which they portray as detached from the reality of citizens' lives. As a result,

climate measures are often portrayed as elitist impositions that disproportionately harm ordinary people (Jacob et al., 2020, pp. 7-8; Lockwood, 2018, pp. 721-725). They typically build their opposition to climate policy based on different reasons. They reject EU-led climate initiatives as inefficient and overly expensive, arguing that they disadvantage domestic industries in global competition, drive up energy costs and place a disproportionate burden on low-income households (Huber et al., 2021, p. 1005; Jacob et al., 2020, p. 3). In addition, they claim that, for example, subsidies and environmental reforms lead to social inequalities, because they primarily benefit urban elites, while rural populations and working-class communities bear the costs (Jacob et al., 2020, p. 8).

While right-wing populist parties in Europe are often portrayed as straightforward opponents of climate action, recent research suggests a more nuanced and strategically adaptive stance. It is shown that while these parties rarely outright deny the existence of climate change, they particularly tend to oppose those measures, that are perceived as economically burdensome, a threat to national sovereignty or imposed by international bodies such as the EU (Delin, 2023, pp. 81-83; Schaller & Carius, 2019, p. 24). The study from Delin (2023, pp. 82-86) highlights that many right-wing populist parties in Europe have shifted more recently from outright climate denial, known as ‘epistemic skepticism’, toward a more moderate position often referred to as ‘soft climate skepticism’. This approach recognizes the reality of climate change, but questions the international approaches to climate governance and their feasibility, known as ‘response scepticism’, especially those coordinated through the EU. Forchtner & Lubarda (2023) show that far-right parties in the EP rarely deny anthropogenic climate change directly, but predominantly express scepticism toward climate policies and institutions. National Rally from France, for example, presents itself as environmentally concerned, but uses climate policy primarily to support its nationalist agenda rather than to promote real environmental change. While it avoids denying climate change, it rejects international cooperation and presents EU climate measures as a threat to French independence and everyday life. In this way, the party turns climate issues into a tool to criticise external influences and position itself as a defender of national interests (Delin, 2023, p. 84-85; Schaller & Carius, 2019, p. 11). Kulin et al. (2021, p. 1112) also point out that right-wing populist parties in Western Europe often support national environmental measures, such as protecting the countryside or enhancing public transport, but reject international or EU-level climate policies as incompatible with national interests and as interference in national decision-making. In contrast, other right-wing populist parties like Germany’s AfD continue to reject the scientific evidence on climate change and present it as a lie created by elites to impose their agenda on ordinary people and undermine national interests.

They oppose renewable energy, international agreements and describe climate policy as harmful (Delin, 2023, pp. 83-84).

Some studies strongly emphasise the strategic nature of right-wing populist parties' positions on climate policy, highlighting their adaptability to national context, public opinion on environmental issues and political opportunity structures, like the strength of green parties in the national party system (Oswald et al., 2021, pp. 202). Their positions may also shift in response to public and electoral pressure and the broader salience of the issue (Delin, 2023, pp. 85-86). This strategic engagement becomes evident in how right-wing populist parties adjust their environmental and climate positions in response to the broader political landscape. In countries where green parties are strong and climate issues play a major role, right-wing populist parties often adopt a confrontational and oppositional stance, as seen in Germany, whereas in contexts where the issue is less clearly occupied by mainstream actors, they tend to adopt more tailored, culturally framed environmental positions (Oswald et al., 2021, pp. 196-198). Huber et al. (2021, pp. 1006, 1011-1012) illustrate this further, by showing that right-wing populist parties tend to act differently depending on whether they are in opposition or in power. While in opposition, they often take a strongly critical stance toward climate policies, they usually adopt a more pragmatic approach once in government. Rather than openly rejecting climate policies, they often weaken them indirectly, by delaying and obstructing implementation and “bargain hard to win concessions or opt-outs and attempt to limit the ambition of [energy and climate policy]” (Huber et al., 2021, p. 1012). Caiani & Lubarda (2024) further point out that right-wing populist parties in power, such as the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary and Lega in Italy, do not necessarily follow fixed ideological lines, but instead adapt their environmental positions based on political opportunities. This results in a form of ‘conditional environmentalism’ that selectively supports ecological measures when they align with political or electoral interests.

Overall, research suggests that right-wing populist parties pose a structural and evolving challenge to EU climate policy (Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2024, pp. 17-18). Their opposition is deeply embedded in populist logics of sovereignty, elite critique and national preference, which are in direct tension with the EU’s multilateral, long-term and science-driven approach. Even if some parties moderate their rhetoric and do not deny the climate problem outright, their participation in climate governance is more likely to create disruption than meaningful cooperation or coherent, ambitious climate coalitions (Delin, 2023, pp. 86-88).

2.2.3.2 Security policy

Foreign and security policy is another key area of EU integration in which the positions and influence of right-wing populist parties require closer analysis. According to several studies, the actual influence of these parties on the EU's foreign and security policy remains limited. Instead of formulating coherent alternative strategies, these parties often instrumentalize security-related issues for domestic political purposes. Despite their shared criticism of the EU and their emphasis on national sovereignty, their positions, for example, towards Russia differ and tend to shift in response to changing political circumstances (Henke & Maher, 2021, p. 392; Shein & Ryzhkin, 2024, p. 298). The shift in rhetoric after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 illustrates particularly how adaptable and context-dependent their positions are (Carlotti, 2023, pp. 1464-1465; Shein & Ryzhkin, 2024, p. 297). Carlotti (2023, pp. 1452-1456, 1464-1466) highlights that in the past right-wing populist parties, especially from Western Europe, have increasingly aligned themselves with Russia, based on shared political views such as opposition to the EU, populism and illiberal values. This alignment provided symbolic benefits to both sides, since it allowed Russia to claim legitimacy within Europe while enabling right-wing populist parties to criticise the EU and promote an alternative model of governance. However, this alliance appears to be based on political convenience and strategic considerations rather than a stable cooperation, as the war in Ukraine, has exposed the fragility of this relationship. In response to increasing political pressure, several parties have distanced themselves from earlier pro-Russian positions, revealing the opportunistic nature of this relationship. For example, Meloni's FdI, which was ideologically close, became more openly critical after the invasion (Carlotti, 2023, p. 1464).

The findings from Henke and Maher (2021, pp. 394-402) also suggest that despite growing electoral support, right-wing populist parties in Europe have not fundamentally altered the structure or direction of EU defence policy, since their positions on defence differ across key areas such as military spending, force integration and threat perception. Most right-wing populist parties are in favour of stronger national defence capabilities and are sceptical about supra-national initiatives such as an EU army. However, their willingness to engage in some form of intergovernmental cooperation suggests that they are not categorically opposed to joint European efforts, especially if such cooperation is in line with national interests. What they also have in common is that they use the issue of Russia mainly as a rhetoric tool to challenge the political mainstream in their own countries, rather than to present clear or consistent foreign policy alternatives (Shein & Ryzhkin, 2024, p. 298). Shein and Ryzhkin (2024, pp. 294-296)

reinforce this view, by focusing on the complex and inconsistent positions of right-wing populist parties in the EU regarding its foreign and security policy, especially towards Russia. Their comparison of different right-wing populist parties reveals, that while parties like AfD in Germany have openly promoted a strategic partnership with Russia, others such as Fidesz in Hungary follow a more pragmatic stance. Ultimately, it is shown that these parties rarely influence EU foreign policy even when in government, as they tend to moderate their positions and adapt to existing foreign policy frameworks when in power (Shein & Ryzhkin, 2024, p. 293). Overall, the findings of the papers suggests that while right-wing populist parties may disrupt the foreign policy discourse of the EU, their actual impact on the EU's direction in this policy areas remains limited and largely rhetorical and symbolic.

This section provided important insights into the relationship between right-wing populist parties and European integration and presented climate and security policy as illustrative examples of policy areas, in which these parties take different positions. Following these observations, it is important to consider the 2024 European elections, which were characterised by recent crises and underline the growing importance of right-wing populist parties in the debates on European integration.

2.3 Right-wing populism in the context of the 2024 European elections

In the context of the 2024 European elections, that took place from 6th to 9th June 2024, the right-wing populist parties received particular attention in political debates and academic analyses, especially because they had made significant gains in national elections across several member states in previous years (Mudde, 2024a, p. 121; M. Müller, 2024, pp. 276-277). Before examining this further, it is useful to first outline how elections to the EP are structured and function. The EP is the only institution of the EU that is directly elected since 1979. However, the elections to the EP are often described as 'second-order elections'. This is because European elections do not result in the formation of a government unlike national elections, that directly determine executive power. Instead, the so-called Members of the EP (MEPs) are elected to a supranational legislative body that functions alongside, but mostly independently, from the European Commission and the European Council. Consequently, EP elections are generally characterized by lower voter turnout and a greater tendency towards protest voting. The elections to the EP take place every five years and allow citizens from all 27 EU member states to vote for their representatives, known as MEPs (Mudde, 2024b, pp. 61-62). Although the elections take place at the same time across the EU, they are essentially 27 separate elections at the national level, because each is organized according to the electoral rules of the respective member

state. This means that voters in Germany, Italy or Hungary may use different voting systems, and political parties run their campaigns mainly on national issues rather than on a common European agenda (Mudde, 2024a, pp. 123-124).

Although the EP has gradually increased its powers, it remains a unique and often misunderstood institution, according to Mudde (2024b, p. 61). MEPs do not sit in national delegations, but are grouped according to transnational political affiliations, “which are organised by ideology, at least in theory – in practice, more opportunistic power considerations often play a role, too.” (Mudde, 2024b, p. 61). In addition, to be formally recognized, a political group in the EP must have a minimum of 23 MEPs from at least one-quarter of member states (Mudde, 2024a, p. 128). This structure complicates coalition building after the election, particularly for ideologically fragmented political families like the right-wing parties (Jeong, 2024, p. 24).

The 2024 European elections took place at a time of great uncertainty, characterised by multiple overlapping crises, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion in 2022, the renewed conflict in the Middle East as well as the continued consequences of previous events like the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit (Mudde, 2024a, p. 124; 2024b, p. 62). This was further intensified by energy insecurities, economic instability and continued refugee and migration pressures across the EU (M. Müller, 2024, pp. 276-277). Politically, the results of the 2024 elections confirmed a rightward shift within the EP and “left the European Union with a Parliament that is more right-wing, more fragmented, and more polarised than ever before.” (Jeong, 2024, p. 23). While the centrist political groups of the EPP, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats and Renew Europe retained a working majority, it did so with weakened strength and increasing internal division. Within this weakened centre, the EPP gained more power as the main coalition-builder. Right-wing groups, including the ECR and newly restructured groups such as PfiE made significant gains (Jeong, 2024, p. 23).

One of the most important developments in 2024 was the reorganisation of the far-right groups in the EP. Previously, most of these parties were divided between the ID group and the ECR. In 2024, however, the new group PfiE was formed by Hungary's Fidesz, the Freedom Party of Austria and Czechia's ANO, absorbing most of the ID parties. At the same time, the German AfD, which had been suspended from the ID due to a series of scandals, created another new group called ESN, which is mainly made up of smaller far-right parties from Eastern Europe. The PfiE group became the third largest group with 84 seats, while the ECR increased its share to 78 seats, making it the fourth largest group in the EP, whereas the ESN remained relatively small with 25 seats (Mudde, 2024a, pp. 126-128). Compared to the 2019–2024 legislative period, the composition of the EP in 2024 has shifted both numerically and politically. The 2024

European elections were the first held without the UK. Although the total number of seats was reduced to 705 after Brexit, it was increased again to 720 seats for the period 2024-2029 to take account of demographic changes in the EU (Mudde, 2024a, p. 121; M. Müller, 2024, p. 278). Figures 4 and 5 provide a comparative overview of the seat distribution in the EP before and after the 2024 elections and the changes in political group formations.

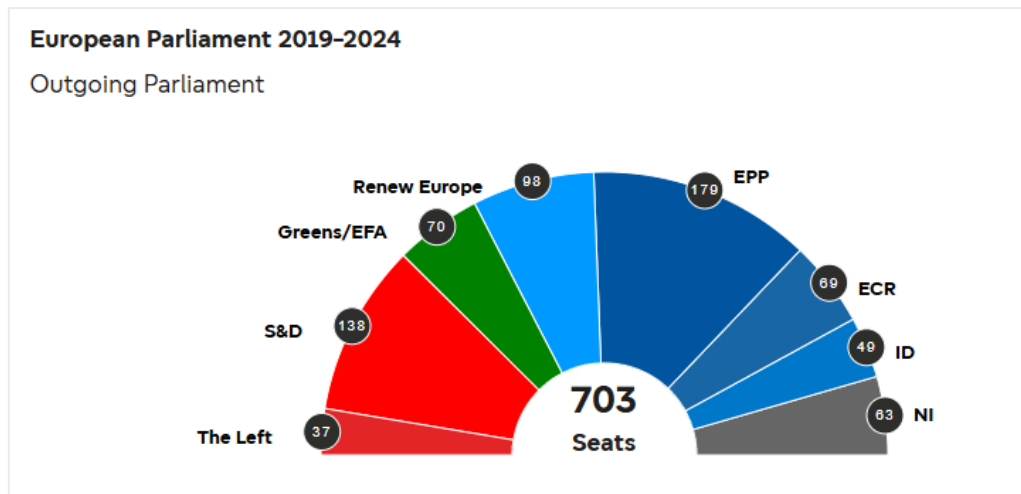


Figure 4: Composition of the European Parliament 2019–2024 (European Parliament, 2024f)

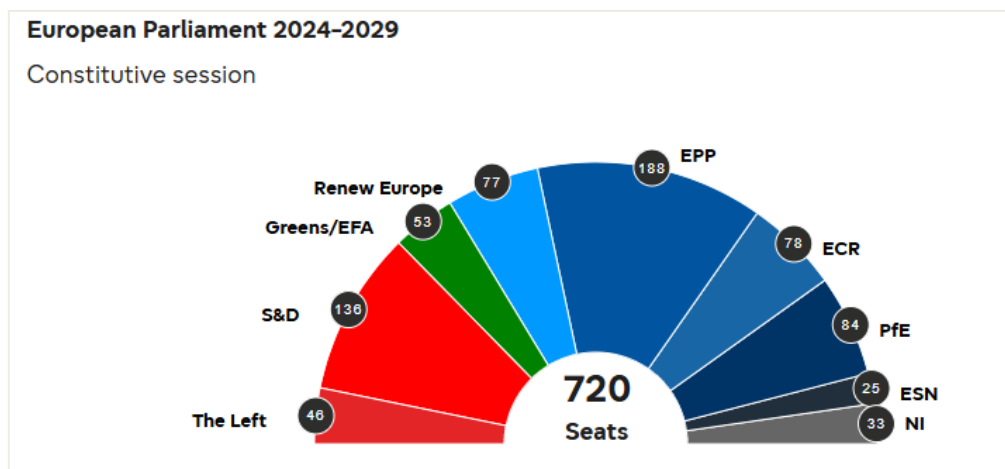


Figure 5: Composition of the European Parliament 2024–2029 (European Parliament, 2024a)

Even though a direct comparison between the two compositions of the EP is difficult due to the changed seats and new group building, it is important to recognize, that although the rise of the far right received a lot of media attention in the 2024 European elections, the actual increase in their results was relatively modest compared to the previous European election. While the election revealed significant gains for right-wing populist parties in key member states, such as France, Germany and Italy, far-right parties in Northern and Eastern Europe experienced stagnation or even a decline in support, which resulted in a fragmented outcome across the EU (Becker & Von Ondarza, 2024, pp. 1-2). Nevertheless, the overall result in the EP marked a

new historic high in 2024, since the far-right groups now making up more than one quarter of all seats, with a combined total of 187 MEPs (Mudde, 2024a, p. 122; M. Müller, 2024, p. 277). The far right is now split into the three political groups ECR, PfE and ESN. This division in the EP makes it hard for them to act together as a strong political force, even though their overall numbers have grown (Jeong, 2024, pp. 24-25; Mudde, 2024a, p. 122). Nevertheless, their growing presence has already begun to reshape the tone and agenda of parliamentary debates, especially on issues such as climate policy, migration and foreign affairs (Jeong, 2024, pp. 23-24; Mudde, 2024a, pp. 130-132). In light of recent crises and the results of the 2024 European elections, it is crucial to reassess the role of right-wing populist parties in current integration debates, since their increased presence may strengthen their ability to promote their positions, especially in specific areas such as climate and security policy, which are becoming increasingly important (Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2024, pp. 17-18).

Research gap

While the EP has increasingly become a central legislative body within the EU that is known for representing a wide range of political views, the growing success of right-wing populist and Eurosceptic parties at the national as well as the EU level raises important questions about the future of European integration. As already mentioned, the 2024 European elections marked a historic high in support for these parties, which can pose a challenge for the foundations of European cooperation because of their positions (Hwang, 2025, p. 17). In existing literature, the supply side, which means the parties themselves and their ideological and programmatic positions, have been well documented (Heinze, 2022, pp. 163-164). This applies also to their stances on the EU and European integration, particularly their fundamental criticisms of the EU and calls for the strengthening of national sovereignty (see chapter 2.2.2). Research has also increasingly examined how right-wing populist parties position themselves on different policy areas, with particular emphasis on well-studied topics such as migration (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, p. 37). More recently, geopolitical shifts and the growing importance of global challenges, such as climate change and international security, exacerbated by events like the war in Ukraine, have led to increased scholarly attention on how these parties approach climate policy as well as security cooperation (see chapter 2.2.3).

Existing research on populist parties in the context of climate and security policy primarily relies on qualitative methods. Most studies apply qualitative content analysis of party documents, parliamentary speeches, social media communication or official statements to reconstruct ideological orientations and rhetorical strategies (Caiani & Lubarda, 2024; Forchtner & Lubarda, 2023; Henke & Maher, 2021; Oswald et al., 2021; Schaller & Carius, 2019). Some

are complemented by quantitative components, such as the analysis of voting behaviour in the EP (Schaller & Carius, 2019) or the use of survey data to assess general patterns in climate policy attitudes (Kulin et al., 2021; Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2024). A few studies, combine content analysis with comparative case study approaches but tend to focus on only one specific policy area (Shein & Ryzhkin, 2024), selected countries with similar political structures (Oswald et al., 2021) or parties that are all in government (Caiani & Lubarda, 2024; Petrović et al., 2023). In this thesis, an alternative approach is taken by comparing the three quite different parties FdI, Fidesz und AfD in two different policy areas. These cases were chosen because the parties differ strongly in terms of their political and national contexts and their different affiliation to political groups in the EP, but at the same time share important ideological similarities, such as a critical stance toward the EU and Euroscepticism. A comparative perspective is particularly relevant given the increasing political influence of these parties both at the national level and within European institutions, especially in light of the last national elections in the respective countries and the 2024 European elections, which led to new political constellations and internal shifts. In the case of the AfD, the study also incorporates its latest national programme from 2025, which has so far received little academic attention. Its inclusion allows the study to incorporate the latest developments, especially in light of the party's classification as a suspected right-wing extremist organization in May 2024 (Lanchès, 2025), thereby contributing new insights to the existing research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To answer the research question, the thesis employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine how three right-wing populist parties position themselves in practice in key policy areas on European integration, following the 2024 European elections. A comparative case study is a research approach that examines multiple cases to identify patterns, differences and contextual influences across various settings (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, pp. 906-911). Comparative research broadly encompasses both qualitative and quantitative methods and is commonly used to analyse cross-national variations of social or political phenomena (Mills et al., 2006, p. 621). “The underlying goal of comparative analysis is to search for similarity and variance” (Mills et al., 2006, p. 621), which suggests that this method is particularly suitable for this research, as it enables a structured comparison of policy positions of right-wing populist parties in different EU member states, that are organized in different EP groups. By applying this comparative case study approach, the research allows for an in-depth examination of how

right-wing populist parties frame these issues across different national contexts, exploring whether they take a uniform stance to EU integration in the areas of climate and security or whether their positions are more nuanced, shaped by strategic interests or domestic political considerations.

In this study, the comparative case approach is operationalised through a two-stage process. First, a multi-case study design is applied to analyse the three selected parties in depth, which means, that each party is examined individually to provide a comprehensive understanding of its historical development, ideological orientation and policy positions. Second, a cross-case analysis is conducted to synthesize the findings and systematically compare their positions on European integration in the areas of climate and security (see Figure 6). Following Stake (2006, pp. 22-23, 39-41), the multi-case approach is appropriate, when the cases share certain characteristics but also have significant differences, so that both the uniqueness and similarities of each case can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding. After analysing each case individually, a cross-case analysis helps to identify both convergences and divergences across cases. This comparison aims to uncover contextual factors and recurring patterns that may not be visible in an individual case, with a particular emphasis on the differences between cases, as these often provide the most insights that help to understand how the phenomenon behaves under different conditions.



Figure 6: Multiple case study design (Own illustration)

3.2 Case selection

To systematically address the research questions, the study focuses on the three EU member states Italy, Hungary and Germany and their leading right-wing populist parties FdI, Fidesz and AfD. The study follows a small-N research design, which is characterised by the targeted and in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases, usually between three and ten (Pickel, 2015, p. 8). Regarding the case selection, “[t]he cases should correspond to our theoretical framework

and the variables we are studying.” (Ghauri & Firth, 2009, p. 32). In contrast to statistical approaches that aim for representativeness, qualitative multi-case studies typically rely on purposive sampling to ensure diversity and enable an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. Cases should be selected based on their relevance to the research focus, their variation across different contexts, and their potential to offer insights into complexity and contextual dynamics (Stake, 2006, pp. 23-24). The selection of the cases is therefore based on several criteria:

1. The *first criterion* is their classification as part of the right-wing populist party family, characterised by a combination of populism and exclusionary nativism, and in some cases authoritarian tendencies (Mudde, 2007, p. 22). While Mudde's definition originally refers to the populist radical right, this study applies it more broadly to parties generally considered right-wing populist, given the conceptual overlap and blurred distinctions in practice. All three parties examined in this thesis can be classified as right-wing populist, although with national specificities and varying degrees of radicalism. As Roch (2023, p. 167) notes, most scholars today regard the AfD as a right-wing populist party, though its discourse and policy positions reveal internal tensions and a range of ideological influences. While the party's early manifestos showed a more moderate profile, it has taken a sharper populist and radical turn since the refugee crisis of 2015 (Arzheimer, 2023, p. 142). In addition, it must be noted that the AfD was temporarily classified as a right-wing extremist party by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in May 2025 but will be included in this analysis under the category of right-wing populism insofar, as it continues to participate in democratic elections and frames its agenda within a populist logic. The status has been suspended again pending legal reviews and until then the party is considered a suspected case (Lanchès, 2025). Similarly, Fidesz, initially a liberal-conservative force, has evolved under Viktor Orbán into a consolidated right-wing populist actor, particularly through its emphasis on national sovereignty, anti-immigration rhetoric and its framing of the EU as an elite project detached from the people (Mos & Macedo Piovezan, 2024, p. 335). FdI under Giorgia Meloni also fits into this categorization: while it presents itself as a responsible governing party at the European level, its position remains deeply rooted in nationalist and anti-elitist narratives, including calls for national sovereignty, strong leadership and the defence of traditional social norms. Some of these ideas also resemble elements from Italy's fascist past, even if they are now expressed in a more modern and democratic way (Agnew, 2023, pp. 309-310). This makes it a clear example of right-wing populism, even though it is often labelled in the literature as part of the populist radical right (Baldini et al., 2022, p. 385).

2. The *second criterion* is their affiliation with different right-wing political groups in the EP, to allow for the comparison: FdI in ECR, Fidesz in PfE and AfD in ESN. While other parties within these EP groups could have been also considered, these three parties were chosen because of their central roles at the national level and in their respective political groups, especially following their electoral success in the European elections of 2024. Both FdI and AfD secured the largest number of seats within their groups, with FdI holding 24 out of 78 seats in the ECR and AfD holding 14 out of 25 seats in the ESN (European Parliament, 2024b). Although Fidesz does not hold the largest number of seats within the PfE group, it was one of the founding parties of the newly established PfE group and remains a key actor due to its long-standing role as a dominant populist actor and right-wing force in both Hungarian and European politics. The party has been in government since 2010 under Viktor Orbán, making it one of the longest-governing right-wing populist parties in the EU (Aktas, 2024, pp. 592-593).
3. The *third selection criterion* concerns the different political and national contexts in which the parties operate, as Italy, Hungary and Germany have, for example, divergent political systems and vary in terms of government participation. While Hungary has established an authoritarian style of government under Fidesz, Germany is considered a stable constitutional state with a generally pro-European orientation, where the AfD operates in the opposition. Italy, by contrast, is characterised by a polarised and fragmented political system with frequent changing governments, with the FdI currently in government since 2022 (Aktas, 2024, pp. 592-593; Arzheimer, 2023, p. 140; Vachudova, 2020, p. 318). These three cases also represent different subregions within the EU, namely Southern, Western and East-Central Europe, which adds to the contextual diversity of the analysis (Publications Office of the European Union, n.d., 2019, 2021).
4. *Finally*, the selection of these three parties was also based on their potential significance for the key policy areas climate and security policy. They are active in EU member states that are considered particularly strategically relevant in security policy, either due to their political and economic importance or their geographical location. Germany and Italy are among the largest member states of the EU and play a central role in the European security structure, both politically and militarily, as they are, for example, among the top defence spenders in the EU (see figure 7). Germany is also an indispensable strategic partner in shaping joint security initiatives, while Italy is heavily involved in security policy in the Mediterranean region at the southern borders. Hungary, on the other hand, is located on the EU's

eastern external border and plays a key role in migration and border security issues. Against this background, the security policy positions of the right-wing populist parties in these countries could have a significant impact on the future direction of EU security and defence policy (Henke & Maher, 2021, pp. 390, 400; The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025, pp. 52, 56, 100, 103-104). Therefore, these three parties are particularly suitable for comparing their positions on the security policy dimension of European integration.

The EU member states in which the parties FdI, Fidesz and AfD operate also play a decisive role in the area of climate. Drawing on the typology developed by Maris and Flouros (2021, pp. 1-2, 11-12), which categorizes EU member states according to their responses to the EU's climate policy framework, these three countries represent contrasting approaches within the Union. Germany and Italy are considered pioneering countries or 'pace-setters' that actively shape and drive EU climate and energy policy forward. Especially Germany, promotes ambitious climate goals and plays a leading role in shaping EU-wide energy strategies. Italy also supports the implementation of EU recommendations, but faces some internal challenges, such as administrative fragmentation and uneven implementation capacities. Hungary, by contrast, is an example of the 'fence-sitter' category and takes a more selective approach to EU climate policy, partially aligning with EU goals while maintaining a cautious national position (see Figure 8).

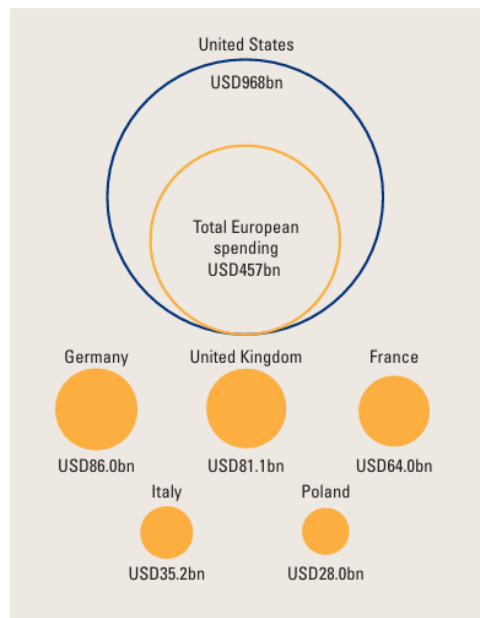


Figure 7: Europe defence spending, 2024 – top 5 (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025, p. 52)

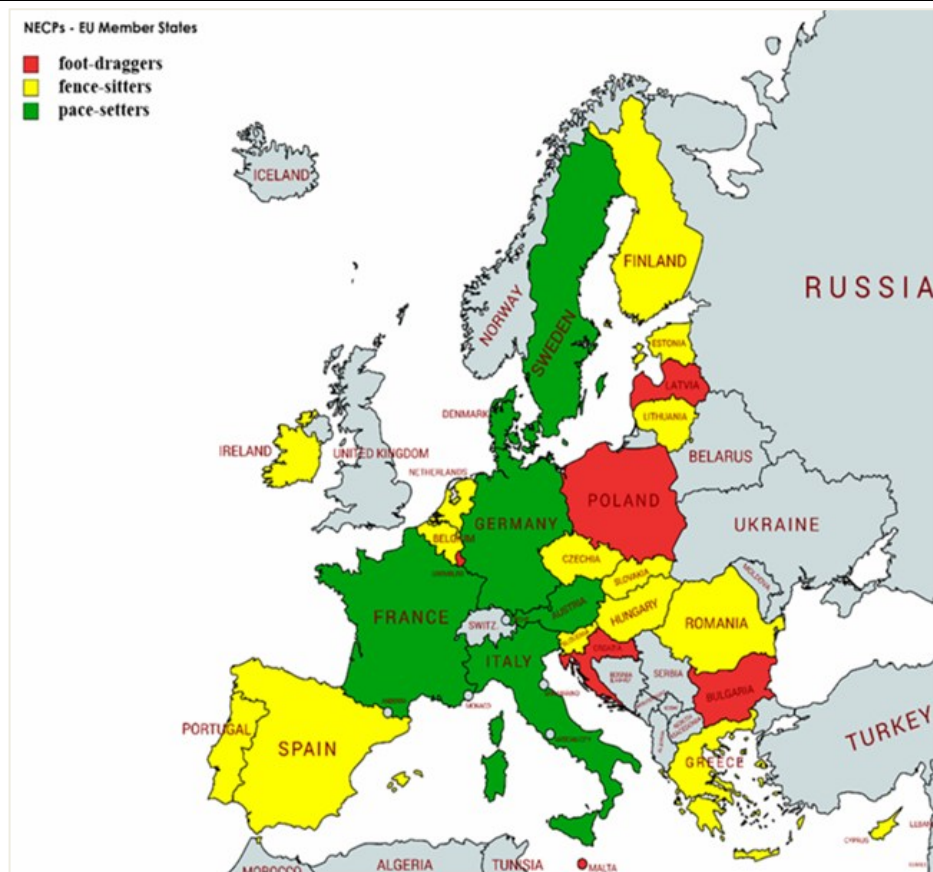


Figure 8: Member States' strategies in energy, climate, and environment policies based on EU's recommendations (Maris & Flouros, 2021, p. 12)

The analysis will include a detailed case description for each selected country and will analyse the positions of these parties in the two policy areas climate and security. These policy areas were chosen for three main reasons. *First*, both fields represent core areas of European integration that require substantial cooperation among member states. However, the sense of national sovereignty is particularly strong in these policy areas, which can act as a barrier to integration, and which is why the transfer of competences to the EU level is considered particularly controversial here (Kulin et al., 2021, p. 1116; Rosamond, 2023, p. 281; Treude, 2024, p. 45). *Second* criteria is the centrality of the two areas in right-wing populist discourse, since the selected right-wing populist parties are particularly vocal and politically active in these domains, often framing them as issues of national sovereignty and control (Heinisch et al., 2021, p. 38; Kulin et al., 2021, p. 1111; Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, p. 1). The *last reason* for focusing on these policy areas is their heightened relevance in times of crisis. Climate change is a long-term, systemic challenge that requires coordinated responses, while security concerns, particularly in light of Russia's war against Ukraine since 2022, have increased the urgency for joint action at EU level (Leruth, 2023, pp. 87-88; Treude, 2024, p. 25). The comparative element will allow for the identification of patterns in how these parties frame their policies (Ghauri & Firth, 2009, pp. 32-36).

3.3 Data collection

The case study will rely on multiple sources of primary and secondary qualitative data to ensure a comprehensive and representative analysis. The documents were selected based on their relevance to the research question, their accessibility and their official status. The research draws on the following primary sources to assess how the parties position themselves on European integration in the selected policy areas:

- Official party manifestos
- Documented speeches and interviews
- Position statements by party representatives

Additionally, secondary sources, such as research reports and academic research papers, will be used to contextualise the historical development and political background of the parties, including their electoral performance. Research reports also serve to identify and verify party positions in cases where official documents remain vague or silent on specific issues.

The set of primary data used for this analysis stems mainly from the period between 2024 and May 2025 to capture the current positions of the right-wing populist parties towards climate and security policy in the light of recent electoral developments. For FdI, earlier party and coalition programmes from the last national elections in 2018 and 2022 were also considered. The selection focuses primarily on official election manifestos, which represent a central and formally structured type of political communication. Election manifestos help to capture a party's ideological orientation, policy positions and goals at a given point in time and are designed to address a broad electorate. Although only a small number of voters read these programmes in full, their content often reaches the public through media coverage (Volkens, 2002, pp. 1-2). In addition to their aim of presenting party positions, election programmes also serve the following purposes:

- “2. Election programs are authoritative statements of party policies because the programs are usually ratified in party conventions.
3. Election programs are representative statements for the whole party, not just statements of one faction or group within the party or of individual party members.
4. Election programs are published before every election. Thus, changes of policy positions of parties over time can be studied.” (Volkens, 2002, p. 2)

This shows, that because of their official character and clear structure, they are well suited for comparing parties across countries and time. If no official election programme is available, other sources such as newspaper summaries, public statements or reports by party officials may

be used, as long as they reflect the party's official stance and come as close as possible to the ideal type of an election manifesto (Volken, 2002, pp. 1-2).

With regard to the election programmes, the analysis is primarily based on the most recent programmes, in particular the programmes of the 2024 European elections and the latest general elections in the respective country. For the AfD, this includes the 2024 European election programme and the 2025 federal election programme. For FdI, the analysis draws on the 2024 European election programme, the coalition agreement after the 2022 general election as well as the 15-point programme from the 2018 general election. In addition, position statements of party representatives published on the official FdI website were consulted to complement the programme-based analysis. Since Fidesz did not publish an official election manifesto for the 2024 European elections nor any programme from previous years, documented speeches and interviews by the party leadership from recent years were used instead. These sources serve as a functional equivalent to a formal party programme, since they express official positions in a similar way. The selection was based on relevance to the research topic, with a focus on speeches, that addressed key issues such as climate and energy policy, national and European security, foreign relations, defence and war-related developments. These were identified through targeted keyword searches and manual browsing of official party websites.

All documents were available in written text form, such as PDF versions of manifestos, documented transcripts of speeches and interviews as well as documented position statements on the official websites of the parties. While most documents were available in English, the German and Italian party programmes had to be translated, which may pose a minor limitation regarding interpretation accuracy.

3.4 Qualitative content analysis according to Mayring

This study applies a qualitative content analysis following the approach developed by Mayring, which was chosen because it allows for a structured yet flexible evaluation of text data. As Mayring (2022, p. 60) states, qualitative content analysis aims "to retain the strengths of quantitative content analysis and against this background to develop techniques of systematic, qualitatively oriented text analysis." It adheres to clearly defined rules to guarantee a systematic procedure based on guidelines and therefore ensures transparency in the derivation of conclusions. This should allow other researchers to retrace the analysis and assess the academic value of the study (Mayring, 2022, p. 66).

The starting point for such an analysis is the precise definition of the source material and its contextual background. Details regarding the selection process of the data, including the data types, formal characteristics and its origins are given in section 3.3. The basis for the interpretation of these materials is established through well-defined research questions, developed in chapter 1, and a clear theoretical framework, which can be found in the conceptual part of this thesis (see chapter 2) (Mayring, 2022, pp. 105, 130-131).

According to Mayring (2022, pp. 72-75), qualitative content analysis distinguishes between three fundamental interpretation approaches: *summarizing*, *explicating* and *structuring* content analysis. *Summarizing* content analysis reduces material to essential information, while *explicating* content analysis explains unclear parts using further material. This analysis is based on a *structuring* content analysis, which seeks to systematically organize the material based on specific criteria and identify relevant content in relation to the research question. These criteria can either be derived deductively from theory or developed inductively from the material itself. This study applies a mixed approach that combines deductive category assignment of main categories with inductive category formation of subcategories, following the principles of inductive category formation (see figure 9) (Mayring, 2022, pp. 72-75, 93, 95).

In a first step, the two main categories ‘climate’ and ‘security’ are defined deductively. These categories are not derived from existing theoretical frameworks but are defined pragmatically on the basis of the general research focus, in particular the research question. They serve as a first level of organisation to ensure that the analysis is in line with the research objectives. Selection criteria are established to determine which text passages are relevant, along with defining the categories and the level of abstraction, which is a broad level to capture the full spectrum of party positions on the two areas (step 2) (Mayring, 2022, pp. 83-84, 89). Text passages are considered relevant if they contain explicit or implicit statements that reflect a party's position on climate or security. This includes passages in which parties formulate goals, propose concrete measures, articulate fundamental values or deal with problems in these policy areas (see coding guide appendix A). Subsequently, the material is systematically reviewed for content relevant to the predefined categories and all relating passages, that are found to be thematically connected to the overall research focus, are selected for further analysis.

Within these main categories, the analysis proceeds inductively. This means that subcategories are developed directly from the material during the analysis process. This procedure allows for an open and material-driven exploration of the data, that is seen as “an understanding of the textual material in the language of the material” (Mayring, 2022, pp. 81-82). The core steps involve thoroughly examining the text passages relevant to the predefined main categories line

by line and creating and refining subcategories based on recurring themes and content. New subcategories are formulated when content does not fit into existing subcategories. In this step, a narrower level of abstraction is applied to capture more specific aspects of party positions (step 3). After an initial portion of the material has been analysed (around 10-50% of the relevant text), the category system is critically reviewed and revised to ensure clarity and coherence (step 4). This iterative approach helps refine the coding scheme before it is systematically applied to the entire dataset (step 5). If applicable, subcategories can be grouped into broader main categories to improve the structure of the results, but this is not done in this study (step 6). To ensure reliability, the coding is checked through an intra-coder comparison, which means that after completing the first coding round, the material is reviewed, coded again from the beginning and compared with the previous results. This serves as a quality criterion and indicates the stability of the coding process (step 7). Finally, the categorized data are summarized and the results are interpreted in relation to the initial research question (step 8) (Mayring, 2022, pp. 81-84).

According to Mayring's framework, the process of categorization consists of three steps:

- “1. Definition of the Categories: It is precisely determined which text components belong in a given category (explicit definition).
2. Anchor samples: Concrete passages belonging in particular categories are cited as typical examples to illustrate the character of those categories (prototypes).
3. Coding rules: Where there are problems of delineation between categories, rules are formulated for the purpose of unambiguous assignment to a particular category (demarcation rules).” (Mayring, 2022, pp. 89-90)

Through this process, a coding guideline is developed that clearly specifies how text passages are consistently and transparently assigned to the respective categories, which can be found in the appendix A. While category definitions, anchor samples and coding rules are typically predefined in deductive category application often with the help of theoretical frameworks, they are developed during inductive category formation as part of the iterative coding process and revision. As already mentioned, the coding guideline is not static but is continuously adapted throughout the analysis, especially when new subcategories emerge or when there are ambiguities in the categorisation. This means that for each newly identified subcategory from the data, the coding guideline is expanded by formulating a precise definition, documenting typical examples from the material and specifying coding rules where necessary (Mayring, 2022, pp. 65, 90-92).

Following Mayring's approach to qualitative content analysis, it is also essential to define the so-called units of analysis, which divide the text into segments and simplify the coding process.

This includes the *coding unit*, the *context unit* and the *recording unit*, each serving a specific function within the analysis. The *recording unit* refers to the complete body of material that is analysed using the coding system. In this analysis, official documents of each party, such as manifestos, programmes, documented speeches and interviews as well as position statements and research reports, are treated as individual recording units and form the empirical basis for the application of the category system. The *context unit* defines the largest portion of text that will be considered, which in this analysis comprises coherent thematic statements on a specific topic. The *coding unit*, on the other hand, specifies the smallest segment of text that can be assigned to a category. For this study, the coding unit is defined as a quasi-sentence, which ensures that even brief but meaningful expressions of party positions are systematically captured (Mayring, 2022, pp. 64-65). Overall, the use of Mayring's qualitative content analysis helps to ensure a transparent and replicable method, while at the same time maintaining the interpretative nature of qualitative research, so that variations in party positions can be captured.

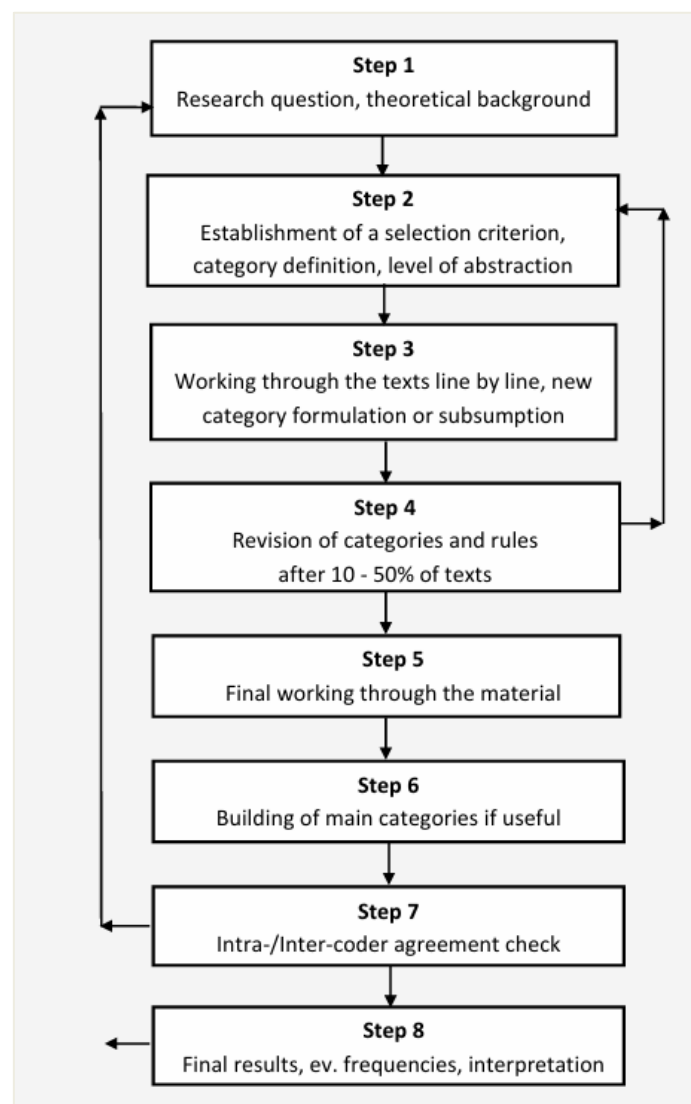


Figure 9: Steps of inductive category development (Mayring, 2022, p. 82)

3.5 Reliability and validity

To make sure that the results of this thesis can be considered trustworthy, it is important to reflect on how valid and reliable the research actually is (Mayring, 2022, pp. 70-71, 173-178). In order to assess the policy positions of the selected parties, this study relies primarily on a qualitative content analysis based on multiple data sources, including party manifestos, position statements of party representatives and documented interviews as well as research reports. This diversity of sources enables a kind of data triangulation (Mayring, 2022, p. 175), that strengthens the validity of the results, because it captures different forms of political communication and reduces the dependence on a single type of document.

While these sources provide a direct insight into how the parties define and communicate their political agenda, they raise important questions about reliability and validity. In terms of reliability, the material that is selected is publicly available, comprehensible and usually produced close to election periods, which ensures a relatively stable and coherent framing and presentation of policy positions. Furthermore, the material was analysed using a structured system of categories and a coding guideline, which makes the analytical process more transparent, easier to follow and therefore contributes to the reliability of the results.

However, there are some limitations regarding validity. Such sources primarily reflect declared intentions rather than actual political behaviour and are often strategically formulated to appeal to specific target groups. For opposition parties in particular, programmatic rhetoric can differ significantly from practical governance if or when they come to power. Additionally, some of the material was originally written in German and Italian and had to be translated into English. Even though the translations were carefully done using reliable translation tools, there is always a risk that certain political nuances or meanings may get lost or slightly distorted, which can affect the validity of the interpretation. These limitations need to be taken into account when interpreting the results.

4. Research findings and discussion

4.1 Multi-case study

4.1.1 Italy: Fratelli d'Italia

4.1.1.1 Historical development and ideological orientation

In the past few years, FdI has developed from a small, relatively marginal party into a major political force in Italy. FdI emerged in 2012 during a time of growing fragmentation within the centre-right in Italy. It was founded as an offshoot of the centre-right party Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom), which was Berlusconi's coalition party that had brought together conservatives, liberals and post-fascists through the merger of his rather moderate Forza Italia with the more radical Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) in 2009 (Donà, 2022, pp. 776, 780; Gattinara & Froio, 2021, pp. 171-173). From the beginning, FdI positioned itself as a nationalist and socially conservative alternative to both the centrist mainstream and more volatile populist actors such as the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) (Baldini et al., 2022, p. 388; Donà, 2022, p. 781). While publicly distancing itself from historical fascism, the FdI retained strong symbolic and ideological ties to Italy's post-fascist tradition, in particular to the legacy of the extreme right and neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement) and its successor, the Alleanza Nazionale. Especially, the use of the logo with the tricolour flame from Movimento Sociale Italiano reflected a clear attempt to preserve this continuity and had high recognition value among nostalgic right-wing voters (Baldini et al., 2022, pp. 388-392; Gattinara & Froio, 2021, p. 173).

During its first years, FdI struggled to gain traction in national politics. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, the party received just 1.96% of the vote, failed to cross the electoral threshold of 4% in the European elections in 2014 with only 3.65% and was barely able to differentiate itself from the dominant right-wing figures, such as Matteo Salvini and his party Lega. However, it gradually consolidated its position by offering a more coherent ideological profile and a consistent opposition stance, particularly in contrast to other parties like the Lega or the Movimento 5 Stelle, that participated in broad and often unstable coalition governments. From 2018 onwards, FdI benefitted significantly from being the only major right-wing party that remained outside of the governing alliances. This allowed the party to present itself as a credible

alternative to the political establishment and to attract voters, who were frustrated with mainstream politics and shifting coalitions (Baldini et al., 2022, pp. 390-391; Donà, 2022, pp. 781-782).

A key factor in the party's rise was the leadership of Giorgia Meloni since 2014, who already started her political career in the youth organisation of the Movimento Sociale Italiano at the age of 15. Through populist communication strategies and a combination of emotionally charged messaging, personal storytelling and a highly effective presence on social media, she managed to strengthen the party's image and expand its reach (Baldini et al., 2022, pp. 389, 391-393). Under her direction, the party shifted further to the right, focusing on issues such as migration, national identity, anti-globalism and traditional family values. These positions were formalized at the 2017 party congress, where FdI clearly defined its ideological direction that was characterized by nativist and Eurosceptic elements. Central to this was also the emphasis on reclaiming national identity and sovereignty. The party portrayed itself as the guardian of Italy's cultural and Christian traditions, which it saw as threatened by immigration, globalization and multiculturalism, and called for tighter border controls and policies that give preference to native Italians in welfare access. In line with its socially conservative outlook, the party also rejected what it labelled as 'gender ideology' and same-sex parenting, instead promoting the traditional family model. In the following years, FdI became also more critical of the EU, calling for a 'Europe of sovereign nations', expressing doubts about the euro and criticizing EU institutions for being too bureaucratic and disconnected from ordinary citizens. These positions became central to its 2018 and 2019 election campaigns and played a key role in shaping its identity as part of the radical right in Europe (Donà, 2022, pp. 785-788).

Over time, FdI steadily could increase its support, reaching 4.35% in the 2018 general election and achieving 6.44% in the 2019 European election, which was its strongest result up to that point (Donà, 2022, p. 782). By the time of the 2022 national election, FdI had managed to position itself as the dominant force on the Italian right, surpassing both the Lega and Forza Italia and becoming the strongest party with 26% of the vote. This led to the formation of a right-wing government together with other two parties and to Giorgia Meloni becoming the first female Prime Minister of the country. This success was not the result of a sudden populist surge but emerged from years of gradual growth in opposition and of building a clear stable party structure, maintaining ideological consistency and effective leadership branding. It marked a significant moment in Italian politics, as a radical right party with post-fascist roots entered government for the first time in the history of the republic (Agnew, 2023, pp. 308, 310-311). As of 2025, FdI under Giorgia Meloni continues to be the leading political force in Italy.

However, in the future, the party will have to find a way to balance the expectations of its radical base with the responsibilities that come with governing, especially in relation to European cooperation (Donà, 2022, p. 790; S. Ventura, 2022, pp. 10-11). In the 2024 European election, FdI emerged as the strongest party in Italy, receiving 28.75% of the vote and was able to further consolidate its leading role in both national and European politics (European Parliament, 2024e). Table 1 shows the electoral performance of FdI in general and European elections from 2013 to 2024, highlighting the party's steady growth and its rise to a leading political force in Italy.

Table 1: Electoral results of FdI in general and European elections (Own illustration)

Year	General elections results (%)	European elections results (%)
2013	1.96	—
2014		3.65
2018	4.35	—
2019	—	6.44
2022	25.99	—
2024	—	28.75

Nowadays, FdI takes a complex, strategic and contradictory stance on the EU that can be best described as ‘equivocal Euroscepticism’. On the surface, the party adopts a clearly critical rhetoric, portraying the EU as an overly bureaucratic and technocratic system that undermines national sovereignty and democratic legitimacy by shifting decision-making power away from elected national governments to unelected European institutions. However, as the party gained influence, particularly after joining the ECR group in the EP in 2019, it shifted from strong positions, like leaving the eurozone towards a more moderated and softer approach, that lies in-between full EU integration and complete rejection. Especially the group affiliation in the EP reflects FdI’s attempt to rebrand itself as a more respectable conservative force on the EU level. It calls for a reformed European integration project that is rooted in the concept of a ‘Europe of sovereign nations’, where member states retain more control over key policy areas and where cultural and national identities are protected rather than subordinated to a centralized supranational state. Even though this vision emphasizes intergovernmental cooperation in some strategic areas, like defence and foreign policy, the party’s core ideology remains strongly sovereignist, rejecting further deeper integration or federalist tendencies. This is seen, for example, by its promotion of reforms that would limit the power of EU institutions and the consistent defence of Hungary and Poland against EU rule-of-law mechanisms (Baldini et al., 2022, pp. 398-399; Bressanelli & De Candia, 2025, p. 66). Under the motto “Do less, do it better” (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024d, p. 1), the party argues for a more efficient and functionally focused EU, that is

able to achieve geopolitical relevance without weakening state sovereignty or causing divisions among member states (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 1; Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 1).

4.1.1.2 Party positions in the field of climate

Climate policy and climate change

FdI adopts a pragmatic and nationally focused approach to climate policy. While acknowledging the importance of addressing climate change, the party consistently frames environmental initiatives through the lens of national interest and economic sustainability (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). FdI clearly emphasizes that any climate-related legislation at the European level must be socially and economically viable, rejecting what they describe as "ideological approaches, unattainable goals and disproportionate burdens for citizens and businesses" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). In the European election programme from 2024, the party criticizes particularly the EGD as an unrealistic and damaging framework, referring to it as a form of "eco-madness" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5) that threatens economic competitiveness and warns that it would lead to a regression for Europe (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5).

In various position statements, FdI representatives, including Nicola Procaccini and Carlo Fidanza, have criticized the ideologically driven EGD's measures for imposing disproportionate burdens on key industrial and agricultural sectors and framed them as detached from practical economic realities. While acknowledging improvements in certain legislative proposals through negotiations in the EU Council, the party remains very sceptical of key measures, such as those targeting industrial emissions and sustainability claims (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024f). In this context, the FdI voted in the EP against several measures related to the EGD (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024g, 2025d) and explicitly opposed the reappointment of Ursula von der Leyen as Commission President in July 2024. It argued that her alignment with green and left-wing political forces and her continued support for EGD policies were not compatible with the mandate for change expressed by European citizens in the 2024 European elections (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024j). Nonetheless, FdI demonstrates a pragmatic openness to engage constructively in environmental policies that prioritize industrial competitiveness and economic sustainability. This approach is reflected in their support for reforms such as the Clean Industrial Deal, which was presented in February 2025, and the revision of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism in May 2025, which they regard as steps towards protecting European competitiveness while acknowledging environmental commitments (Fratelli d'Italia, 2025b, 2025c).

Despite their partially critical stance on EU-level initiatives, FdI promotes national resilience programs, particularly for areas facing hydrogeological risks. They also endorse environmental education and awareness campaigns, aiming to cultivate greater respect for natural ecosystems from an early age (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 4). In line with their broader political philosophy, FdI advocates for the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in EU climate policy, insisting that member states should have the right to determine their own strategies for achieving climate targets, adapted to their specific industrial structures and national contexts (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). Domestically, FdI's 15-point plan includes proposals to create 'urban forests' in cities, promote sustainable mobility and support the gradual transition of polluting industries to more sustainable models (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 4).

Energy policy

FdI frames energy independence as a strategic priority for both Italy and Europe (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13), emphasizing the need for "diversification of suppliers and differentiation of energy sources" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13). They argue that Italy, due to its geographic position and infrastructure, has the potential to become a key energy hub for the EU, particularly through initiatives like the Mattei Plan, aimed at strengthening partnerships with African energy producers (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13). In line with this vision, FdI under Giorgia Meloni has actively pursued bilateral energy agreements with countries such as Algeria, Azerbaijan and Libya, aiming to reduce dependence on Russian imports and reposition Italy as a strategic energy bridge between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean (E. Ventura, 2024, p. 76). FdI supports investment in renewables, hydrogen, storage systems and fusion technologies to strengthen energy security and reduce external dependencies, while also advocating for the use and restoration of national and European energy resources, including the sustainable reactivation of domestic gas fields (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022a, p. 11; 2024d, p. 13). Moreover, FdI also calls for a policy shift toward "energy neutrality to strengthen security in this strategic area" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13).

In terms of EU policy, they argue that member states should have the freedom to determine their own energy strategies without external imposition, reflecting a broader emphasis on national autonomy within the European framework. However, they also align with some EU goals, as they highlight the importance of strengthening energy infrastructure as foreseen in the EU's RePowerEU plan (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13). Additionally, FdI supports European level initiatives such as price cap policies to stabilize energy markets but warns against technology bans, advocating instead for the use of all energy sources, including what they consider "clean and safe nuclear energy" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022a, p. 11).

Green technologies and innovation

FdI is in favour of a pragmatic approach to energy policy that combines national energy sovereignty with investment in innovation and renewable technologies (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 4; 2024d, p. 13). The party therefore promotes increased research and development in the field of energy innovation, with a particular focus on cleaner, safer and more stable fusion energy to make Italy “energetically sovereign and independent” (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13). In addition to supporting the development of renewable energy, the FdI proposes that investment in the green transition should be excluded from the calculation of the national deficit to Gross Domestic Product ratio (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5).

Transportation and mobility sector

FdI takes a critical stance toward current EU policies in the transportation and mobility sector, particularly opposing what it views as the ideological shift toward electric vehicles (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). The party rejects the planned ban on combustion engine vehicles after 2035 and instead advocates for a “revival of the automotive industry based on the principle of technological neutrality” (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). This approach includes promoting investment in all alternative fuels, including the biofuels sector, while protecting the broader supply chain, rather than relying exclusively on electromobility (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). In response to recent adjustments in EU legislation, the party welcomed in February 2025 what it describes as a shift away from ideological commitments toward a more pragmatic approach. Nicola Procaccini, FdI MEP and co-chair of the ECR group, highlighted that it is important to maintain diverse propulsion technologies, including plug-in hybrids and combustion-engine vehicles adapted for electrification beyond 2035. FdI argues that a transition, that relies exclusively on electric vehicles, risks industrial decline in key sectors and insists that sustainability targets should be met through multiple technological pathways (Fratelli d'Italia, 2025a). In addition to supporting innovation in vehicle technology, FdI emphasizes the need for decarbonization across different transport sectors and also highlights investments in sustainable urban mobility as well as promoting the use of public transportation as part of broader efforts to make cities more environmentally friendly (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 4; 2024d, p. 5).

Circular economy

An important element, which is highlighted in its 2022 coalition programme as well as in the government's 15-point plan, is that the party encourages the shift towards a circular economy, by proposing a more sustainable approach to waste management. Its national plan focuses on phasing out non-biodegradable materials, introducing a tax system that rewards lower waste

production and improving recycling processes. FdI also highlights the need for modern waste-to-energy technologies to cut down on landfill sites and reduce the overall consumption of natural resources (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 4; 2022a, p. 12).

Building sector

When it comes to building regulations, FdI advocates to revise the EU's 'green homes' directive to better protect property owners and support a more gradual, sustainable and incentive-driven modernization of the building sector (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). In the EP, FdI positions itself critically towards EU climate policy in the building sector, particularly opposing the directive on energy performance standards for housing. The party views such initiatives as excessive interventions that fail to account for national economic conditions (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024c). Carlo Fidanza, head of the FdI delegation in the EP, criticized in April 2024 the directive as part of the "absurd plans" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024c) of the EGD and praised the Italian government's resistance in the Council. While acknowledging that the requirements were softened during the negotiations, for example, by removing mandatory modernisations for all properties, the FdI considers that the directive imposes disproportionate costs without clear financial support, particularly given Italy's previous difficulties with schemes such as the Superbonus, which offered tax incentives for energy-efficient renovations but burdened public finances (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024c).

Agricultural policy

In the agricultural sector, FdI has taken a critical stance toward the EU's climate-related policies and guidelines, particularly those tied to the EGD, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) or the Nature Restoration Law. The party emphasizes that environmental goals should not undermine the economic viability of farming and calls for a climate policy that better reflects national interests and sectoral sustainability. FdI views agriculture as a key pillar of European food sovereignty and protection of the environment but criticizes current EU initiatives for undermining the sector's role in environmental protection and rural development. According to the party, farmers are important allies in the fight against climate change, which is why they call for a revision of the policies to ensure that agricultural and livestock activities are not disadvantaged. For instance, in their 2024 European election manifesto, they seek to reform the CAP by eliminating rules that restrict agricultural land use and negatively impact farmers' incomes, while also advocating for higher limits on state aid and introduce temporary debt relief (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 4). Overall, their approach aims to balance "independence with ecological and economic sustainability" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022a, p. 13).

This critical stance is closely tied to what the party repeatedly refers to as the dominance of a “green ideology” (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024a) in EU policymaking, driven by figures like Greta Thunberg and Frans Timmermans, which they claim prioritizes ideological goals over practical realities of rural communities. The FdI has linked this approach to the decline of agricultural holdings across Europe, citing a 30% decline in Italy alone and even higher rates in the southern regions. In their view, previous Italian governments before Meloni contributed to this development by aligning too closely with EU climate targets without adequately defending national interests (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024a). At the same time, FdI has welcomed the CAP reform adopted in early 2024, which they see as a significant success for the Meloni government. The reform, which was passed by the Council in March 2024, aims to cut bureaucratic hurdles and allow greater flexibility in how farmers meet environmental standards. Representatives of FdI like Carlo Fidanza praised the reform in the EP as a return to ‘common sense’ in agricultural policymaking and a necessary correction to the EGD (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024b).

Environmental conservation

Environmental conservation is a core component of the FdI’s political agenda, which is why the programmes often include statements about the protection of natural resources and biodiversity (Fratelli d’Italia, 2018, p. 4; 2024d, p. 5), but without what they call “eco-madness” (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024d, p. 5). They emphasize that protecting Italy’s landscapes, rural areas and coastlines is essential not only for biodiversity, but also for preventing environmental risks, such as wildfires, hydrogeological instability and water scarcity. To address these challenges, FdI supports targeted afforestation projects, the restoration of areas affected by natural disasters and the rehabilitation of coastal zones as well as marine environments by removing unsustainable developments (Fratelli d’Italia, 2018, p. 4; 2022a, p. 12). Central to their approach is also the belief that biodiversity must be safeguarded through the creation of new protected areas, while ensuring that natural parks are valued and responsibly opened to tourism (Fratelli d’Italia, 2022a, p. 12; 2024d, p. 4). Finally, the party also promotes efficient water management, calling for improvements in water infrastructure to reduce losses and protect both marine and freshwater ecosystems (Fratelli d’Italia, 2022a, p. 12).

4.1.1.3 Party positions in the field of security

Defence and military

FdI frames security and defence policy as a core element of national sovereignty yet also recognizes the necessity of deeper European cooperation in a changing geopolitical environment.

This shows that its approach reflects a careful balancing act between maintaining national autonomy and engaging more actively at the EU level. For example, in operational terms, FdI advocates for increased European leadership in security missions, as illustrated by its support for the *Operation Aspides*, an EU-coordinated naval operation that is designed to safeguard EU maritime traffic in the Red Sea under Italian tactical command. Initiatives like this signal a move toward stronger European engagement in security while still preserving member state autonomy (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 12). A central point in its program is also the call to align Italy's defence spending with Western standards, which reflects a commitment to fulfil the NATO obligations and maintain the credibility of Italy within the Atlantic alliance. FdI presents itself therefore as a firm supporter of NATO and seeks to strengthen Italy's role within the alliance, both politically and militarily (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 1; 2022, p. 1).

At the same time the party pushes for greater European defence capabilities and autonomy. FdI's support for building a joint industrial policy in defence, that is focused on reducing external dependencies and fostering research, development and production, signals a commitment of European strategic sovereignty. By promoting, for example, cooperation among member states' research centres and encouraging common defence projects, the party aims to enhance Europe's technological independence, while maintaining integration into NATO structures. Moreover, its proposal to formally institutionalize meetings of EU defence ministers further indicates a push for stronger intra-European defence coordination, including better information sharing and joint threat analysis among EU member states (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 12).

International relations

FdI advocates a foreign policy firmly rooted in the defence of national interests and the promotion of Italian identity abroad (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 1). It emphasizes the strategic importance of Italian communities worldwide as instruments for enhancing "diplomatic, economic and commercial relations with other states" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 1) and positions Italy as a key actor in the Mediterranean region (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022a, p. 1). One of Giorgia Meloni's key initiatives in this context is the so-called Mattei Plan, which seeks to enhance Italy's leadership in the region by fostering cooperation between the EU, its member states and African countries to combat, for example, extremism and irregular migration (E. Ventura, 2024, pp. 74-75). More broadly, it envisions a foreign policy that strengthens the country's position within Europe, NATO and the Western alliance, insisting that international engagement must consistently serve national sovereignty and the defence of the homeland (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022a, p. 1). In terms of global priorities, it supports the two-state solution in the Middle East and argues

that the EU should place greater strategic focus on Africa, viewing the continent as crucial for Europe's future political and economic stability (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 12).

In the official statements published on the party's website, the FdI makes clear its strategic and ideological orientation towards the US. These statements emphasise not only Giorgia Meloni's personal relationship with Donald Trump, but also the party's broader ambition to position Italy as a central player within the transatlantic alliance. Meloni's invitation as the only EU leader to Trump's 2025 inauguration was described by party officials as proof of "the centrality, credibility, and stability our nation has achieved thanks to this government." (Fratelli d'Italia, 2025e). The party presents Italy as a reliable bridge between Europe and the US committed to shared values and coordinated efforts on global challenges such as migration and security. Meloni described the bilateral relationship as strong and strategically important and emphasizes the intention to deepen cooperation (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024f). Furthermore, FdI draws parallels between Trump's and Meloni's political victories, portraying both as mandates from "common-sense citizens" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024i), that seek strong borders, family protection and economic self-reliance (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024i).

Ukraine war and Russia relations

Consistent with its Atlanticist orientation, FdI also supports diplomatic initiatives to assist Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, combining solidarity with a call for conflict resolution through negotiation. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the FdI also wants to end energy relations with Moscow, thereby underlining its commitment to reducing dependence on Russian resources (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13). This position reflects the party's broader alignment with the US and the transatlantic alliance and signals a distancing from Russia in the current geopolitical context (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022a, p. 1; 2024d, p. 12). However, this stance, marks a notable shift from FdI's earlier ambivalence, as noted in the research report from E. Ventura (2024, p. 75). Before 2022, leading party figures had expressed support for closer cooperation and an easing of sanctions against Russia, and Meloni herself had publicly praised Putin's re-election in 2018. It was only after the invasion that the party clearly supported Ukraine, which underscored a new commitment to Western alliances and European security.

The repositioned supportive stance towards Ukraine also has been consistently reflected in the party's recent statements, which express support for EU and G7 measures to counter Russian aggression, such as the unanimous adoption of new EU sanctions packages and the allocation of 50 billion euros in aid to Ukraine from frozen Russian assets (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024e, 2024h). In doing so, the party consistently emphasised the Italian principles of freedom and sovereignty

(Fratelli d'Italia, 2025f, 2025g). Such actions, as Nicola Procaccini of FdI underscores, represent “a strong signal of unity and cohesion” (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024h) within the EU and reflect a shared commitment to upholding international law (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024h). Another FdI representative Ester Mieli stressed that the conflict should be understood not as a conventional war between two states, but rather as an invasion by Russia against Ukraine, thereby underlining the moral and political imperative for ongoing support from the West (Fratelli d'Italia, 2025f).

4.1.1.4 Party positions on EU spending and funding mechanisms for climate and security

For FdI, the strategic allocation of EU funds plays a central role in promoting the competitiveness of industry and ensuring environmental sustainability. Therefore, FdI advocates for the establishment of common European financial instruments to support strategic industrial sectors related to environmental protection, sustainable mobility and green innovation. The party emphasizes the need for coordinated investments to promote a pragmatic and balanced green transition (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). In their view, the effective use of EU resources is crucial, especially in the context of rising energy and raw material costs, which threaten Europe's economic stability (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022a, p. 2). Particularly in environmental policy, FdI argues for a shift from symbolic climate initiatives toward practical risk prevention and advocates for using EU resources to finance measures designed to enhance territorial security and mitigate the impacts of natural disasters (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5). It becomes clear, that such funding mechanisms should be closely aligned with national needs and territorial priorities, ensuring that European investments effectively address the specific conditions of individual member states. This position becomes particularly evident in FdI's criticism of the RePowerEU initiative, where the party expresses concern over the potential reallocation of cohesion and agricultural funds. They argue this could harm poorer regions, especially in southern Italy, as happened during the Covid crisis. This shows their strong preference for keeping EU funds tied to national and regional priorities, rather than allowing flexible supranational use at the EU level (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022b).

4.1.2 Hungary: Fidesz

4.1.2.1 Historical development and ideological orientation

Fidesz, originally founded in 1988 as a liberal youth movement, stands out as the oldest party among those examined and has undergone one of the most significant ideological transformations in post-communist Europe (Suuronen, 2025, pp. 3-4). The party 'Federation of Young

Democrats (**Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége**, FIDESZ) was founded by a group of young university students in Budapest, including Viktor Orbán. Fidesz emerged in the late stages of Hungary's communist regime and positioned itself as an anti-communist and pro-democratic movement (Csanádi, 2022, p. 27-28; Geva, 2024, p. 14). The party entered the parliament as a small opposition force in the first free elections in 1990 and “was originally located on the left-liberal side of the political spectrum, politically close to the Free Democrats.” (Csanádi, 2022, p. 28). In the early 1990s, Fidesz was also aligned with liberal international networks as a member of the Liberal International (Csanádi, 2022, p. 29).

However, after disappointing election results in 1994, Fidesz underwent a strategic ideological reorientation under Orbán's leadership. The party gradually distanced itself from its liberal roots, moved toward the political right and adopted increasingly conservative and nationalist positions, aiming to expand its electoral base. In 1998, Fidesz formed a governing coalition after the national elections and Orbán became Prime Minister for the first time. Between the governing period from 1998 to 2002, Fidesz strengthened its control over its party organization and was able to take over and weaken its coalition partners, emerging as a dominant actor in the party system. By 2000, Fidesz had left the Liberal International and joined the EPP at the EU level in 2004, which signalled its shift to a conservative force (Csanádi, 2022, pp. 29-30; Geva, 2024, p. 15).

After losing the 2002 elections, Fidesz went into opposition, where Orbán intensified its efforts to centralize the internal party power by replacing collective leadership with an autocratic structure, that positioned him as the sole decision-maker of Fidesz by 2003. Despite losing power to the Hungarian Socialist Party again in 2006, Fidesz solidified its role as the main opposition force, increasingly adopting populist rhetoric and consolidating its political base through voter mobilization. Fidesz, especially under the influence of Orbán, actively fuelled scandals, presented itself as a moral alternative and tried to undermine trust in the government through referendums and mass mobilization, which led to violent protests and growing criticism of the government (Csanádi, 2022, pp. 30-33; Petrović et al., 2023, p. 273). During this time, it became evident that Orbán “successfully implemented the usual technical apparatus of populism” (Csanádi, 2022, p. 34) and that the party further moved rightwards (Geva, 2024, p. 15).

In 2010, Fidesz achieved a two-thirds supermajority in coalition with the Christian Democrats (KDNP), allowing it to undertake far-reaching constitutional and institutional reforms (Csanádi, 2022, pp. 35-36). Orbán launched a comprehensive reorganization of the state with a new constitution, the ‘Fundamental Law’ in 2012, and he openly declared his commitment to build an

‘illiberal state’. Since its return to power, the party has systematically reshaped Hungary’s political system through constitutional reforms, centralization of power and increased control over the media, judiciary and civil society. These developments marked a definitive break with the party’s liberal-democratic origins (Gomez & Leunig, 2022, pp. 655, 657, 666-672; Suuronen, 2025, pp. 1, 7). Between 2011 and 2013, Fidesz also passed laws, including changes to the electoral system, that strengthened its hold on power. Although Fidesz lost voter share in the 2014 elections compared to its 2010 result, the party retained a stable parliamentary majority and managed to secure another supermajority by 2018 with just 34.1% of the votes from the eligible population (Csanádi, 2022, p. 41; Geva, 2024, p. 15). In the 2022 elections, Fidesz, together with its long-standing coalition partner KDNP, once again secured a two-thirds majority with 54.13% of the vote, despite ongoing criticism regarding the fairness of the electoral environment. Since then, the party remains firmly in power, with limited space for effective opposition and increasing signs of democratic backsliding (Bíró-Nagy & Győri, 2022, pp. 1, 3-4). In the 2024 European election, Fidesz received 44.82% of the vote, which represents its weakest performance in a European election (European Parliament, 2024d). Table 2 presents the electoral results of Fidesz in general and European elections between 2014 and 2024, showing consistently high vote shares, with a slight decline in the 2024 European election compared to previous years.

Table 2: Electoral results of Fidesz in general and European elections (Own illustration, data from (European Parliament, 2024d; National Election Office, 2014; Statista, 2018, 2022))

Year	General elections results (%)	European elections results (%)
2014	44.87	51.48
2018	49.28	—
2019	—	52.56
2022	54.13	—
2024	—	44.82

The described political transformation has also involved a broader ideological shift and is commonly described as a move toward an illiberal democracy. As Suuronen (2025, pp. 5-8, 17) outlines, Fidesz political ideology combines anti-liberalism, nationalism and cultural homogeneity into a vision of ‘illiberal democracy’ rooted in national sovereignty and Christian values, that rejects key liberal values such as multiculturalism, immigration and flexible family models. By framing liberalism as elitist and detached from the people, Orbán presents his governance model as more authentically democratic, that protects the nation’s cultural identity and reflects the will of the majority, even if it goes against liberal norms. This ideological stance also shaped the party’s positioning within the EU. After years of internal conflicts, Fidesz left the EPP group

in the EP in 2021 and established the new parliamentary group PpE, alongside other nationalist and right-wing parties in 2024. This alliance aims to challenge the EU's liberal orientation and promote Orbán's vision of a 'Europe of nations', composed of sovereign patriotic states, that collaborate on shared interests while resisting further political centralization (Geva, 2024, pp. 15-19; Suuronen, 2025, pp. 3, 11). While Fidesz initially engaged positively with the EU, its trajectory and ideological evolution since 2010 until now has been marked by growing confrontation with Brussels. However, the party

“does not see the EU as a threat to Hungary, but opposes the bureaucratic and technocratic model of the EU, its globalism and liberal democracy, and attaches greater importance to the autonomy and national sovereignty of the individual member states.” (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, p. 5)

Fidesz's approach to the EU is therefore shaped by a form of soft Euroscepticism. The party portrays itself as the defender of national sovereignty and traditional values against what it sees as an overreaching liberal and federalist EU elite, that tries to impose uniform values on diverse member states (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti, 2022, p. 1, 5). As a response, Orbán promotes the idea of a 'Europe of nations', where each country retains full control over its sovereignty, without interference from supranational EU institutions. Yet despite ongoing conflicts with Brussels, particularly over issues such as the rule of law, Fidesz does not seek an exit but instead continues to make strategic use of EU institutions to strengthen its legitimacy at home and to promote its conservative agenda at the European level. EU membership is therefore supported for pragmatic reasons and exploited for economic and political gain (Suuronen, 2025, pp. 3, 9-10; Vachudova, 2020, p. 333). For example, EU membership is rooted in expectations of financial benefits rather than shared identity. The EU is perceived less as a community of values and more as a provider of funds, a so-called 'cash machine' (Mach, 2022, pp. 26-27). Thus, Orbán consistently stresses the pragmatic benefits of EU membership, particularly access to the single market, which he calls the Union's "greatest asset" (Orbán, 2024c) and which he does not intend to leave, as it remains essential for Hungary's economic prosperity (Orbán, 2024c).

Fidesz's approach to European integration therefore reflects a blend of pragmatic economic interests and a defence of national sovereignty. The party's vision for the EU is not one of an ever-deeper political union, but rather a "community of free and equal nations, a homeland of nations" (Orbán, 2024a) built upon cooperation among sovereign states rather than supranational centralization. Orbán emphasizes that Hungary remains committed to the EU not because of its current state, but because of "what it could be" (Orbán, 2024a). Orbán argues that Hungary will remain engaged in the European project as long as there is still any realistic opportunity to influence its direction in line with national interests and values (Orbán, 2024a).

4.1.2.2 Party positions in the field of climate

Climate policy and climate change

In its position on climate policy within the EU, Fidesz, under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, adopts a fundamentally pragmatic and economically driven perspective. The party recognises the need for environmental measures, partly due to strong public concern about this issue, but consistently criticises the design and implementation of the EU's climate policies for its economic shortcomings and structural deficiencies. As a result, party has consistently blocked or rejected major EU initiatives, like carbon neutrality targets and the 'Fit for 55' package (Sze-lényi, 2024, p. 69). In Orbán's view, especially the EGD is not only in need of reform, but is basically unworkable and “the EU's suicide attempt” (Orbán, 2025a). He states “that the Green Deal is dead. It cannot be reformed, it cannot be rejuvenated, it cannot be reformulated: it simply has to be forgotten.” (Orbán, 2025d). This radical rejection stems from the conviction that the EU's current climate and energy policy has contributed to a significant decline in Europe's global competitiveness, particularly compared to the US and China. Especially, the EGD, from Fidesz's point of view, exacerbates this situation by enforcing costly decarbonization measures without parallel industrial support, even though it was supposed to be a driver for green job creation, for example (Orbán, 2024a). This leads to deindustrialization, market share and job losses, particularly in sectors like the automotive industry, where “we are applying climate policy without an industrial policy” (Orbán, 2024a). Therefore, Fidesz advocates for a model where climate goals and economic sustainability are aligned, stating that “[t]he green transition and the fight against climate change should not be done against the business community, but together with it.” (Orbán, 2024d). Orbán cites Hungary's own success in reducing emissions and increasing Gross Domestic Product at the same time as proof that environmental and economic goals can go hand in hand. He also highlights Hungary's position as one of the EU's more advanced member states in reducing carbon emissions relative to energy output and underscores the government's decision to increase its 2030 climate target from a 40% to a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (Orbán, 2024d).

Moreover, Fidesz frames the EU's current climate and energy strategy as ideologically driven and disconnected from economic realities. Orbán criticizes what he terms “woke capitalism” (Orbán, 2025e), accusing Western liberal elites of prioritizing ideological agendas, such as diversity and environmentalism, over competitiveness and performance, which resulted in factory closures, rising inflation and declining wage values (Orbán, 2025e). The party says, that “climate policy should be guided by careful consideration and common sense, not by ideology,

alarmism, or panic” (Orbán, 2024d) and argues that European policies must reflect the practical interests and opinions of its citizens rather than abstract moral imperatives, advocating for affordable energy, reduced regulatory burdens and investment-friendly conditions (Orbán, 2024a, 2024d, 2025e).

Ultimately, Fidesz also criticizes the increasing centralization of EU powers in climate issues, asserting that failed strategies like the Europe 2020 and now the EGD have led to further bureaucratic overreach rather than reflection and reform (Orbán, 2025e). In summary, Fidesz’s climate policy vision within the framework of European integration focuses on maintaining national sovereignty, economic competitiveness and pragmatic action in environmental protection. In Orbán’s words, the EU should try to “balance ambition with pragmatism” (Orbán, 2024d), ensuring that climate leadership does not come at the cost of Europe’s economic strength (Orbán, 2024d).

Energy policy

Fidesz’s approach to energy policy reflects a consistent emphasis on balancing environmental objectives with economic realities. The Hungarian Presidency expresses scepticism about the assumption that the EU’s economic challenges can be addressed through climate and energy policy alone. Even with optimistic projections regarding the expansion of renewable energy, fossil fuels are expected to remain a dominant factor in energy pricing well into the next decade, according to Orbán (Orbán, 2024a). The party advocates for a continuation of the green transition, but insists, that this must be achieved pragmatically, by maintaining access to traditional energy sources such as natural gas, oil and nuclear power. Orbán stresses that Hungary plans to expand its nuclear capacity to cover 70% of domestic electricity demand, while also advancing electric vehicles and energy storage technologies. Hungary, he argues, demonstrates that it is possible to combine low energy costs with significant growth in renewable energy output (Orbán, 2024d). Fidesz thus advocates for affordable, reliable energy, but argues that current EU policies prioritize ideological green goals over the economic well-being of European citizens (Orbán, 2025e).

In its broader EU critique, Fidesz claims that the combination of sanctions and the EGD has seriously undermined the continent’s competitiveness (Orbán, 2025f). Orbán complains about the loss of what he describes as Europe’s previous economic strategy, which was based on affordable Russian energy and advanced German technology, and asserts that without cheap energy and “[u]nder these conditions we are not competing, but retreating” (Orbán, 2025f). Orbán warns that the decoupling from Russian energy and the subsequent rise in energy costs, driven

by the need to invest in alternative energy sources, have imposed significant burdens on European industries, resulting in production declines of 10–15% in energy-intensive sectors. He stresses that in recent years, the EU has struggled with slower economic growth, declining global trade influence and lagging productivity compared to key international competitors, like the US and China (Orbán, 2024a). He attributes part of this decline to skyrocketing energy costs, arguing that EU companies pay significantly more for electricity and gas than their American counterparts (Orbán, 2024c, 2025d, 2025f). Fidesz also believes that Brussels' push for divestment from Russian energy supplies would have disastrous consequences, especially for Hungary, and warns that "if this is implemented, it will kill the Hungarian economy." (Orbán, 2025f). Moreover, Orbán openly criticises what he sees as the hypocrisy of the EU institutions, which he accuses of enforcing sanctions while at the same time bypassing them through indirect imports of Russian energy (Orbán, 2025e).

In terms of specific policy demands, Fidesz calls for the removal of energy sanctions, an end to the unequal treatment of nuclear energy, and the reactivation of closed energy supply routes. They argue that current EU energy policies must be fundamentally rethought to secure affordable energy for European industry (Orbán, 2025d). Furthermore, Orbán emphasizes the importance of partnering with external actors like Azerbaijan, reflecting Hungary's preference for diversifying energy partnerships outside of traditional European frameworks in the pursuit of climate objectives (Orbán, 2024d). Finally, Fidesz sees alignment with like-minded parties within the EU, such as the AfD and governments such as the French one, as beneficial, especially in energy policy and sovereignty issues, and proposes bilateral relationships or temporary issue-based cooperation to advance shared interests (Orbán, 2025c, 2025d). Orbán underscores that "that everything that AfD stands for today, if it were to be implemented, would be good for Hungary" (Orbán, 2025d), highlighting its stance on energy policy as an example (Orbán, 2025d). At the same time, he emphasizes close cooperation with France on energy prices, particularly in promoting nuclear energy, as the key to affordable and secure energy supply (Orbán, 2025c).

Green technologies and innovation

Despite its overall criticism of the EU's approach towards climate and energy strategies, Fidesz acknowledges areas where targeted policy interventions have yielded positive results. The European battery industry is highlighted as an example of successful strategic investment, where in the past decade, there has been an average 18% rise in public spending on battery technology, leading to notable improvements in patent activity and technological positioning (Orbán,

2024a). According to Orbán, this shows that “targeted and strategic intervention can be successful and beneficial for Europe” (Orbán, 2024a). Hungary’s national strategy reflects this integrated approach, since government has prioritized investments in green technologies such as electromobility and energy storage (Orbán, 2024d, 2025e).

Agricultural policy

Fidesz’s approach to agricultural policy within the broader context of European climate and environmental strategies reflects its general scepticism towards Brussels-driven regulations. It acknowledges the importance of the sector for European societies, but insists that agricultural competitiveness and food security must not be sacrificed for climate goals, warning that current EU policies, shaped by “excessive regulation” (Orbán, 2024a), costs and liberalized imports, are threatening the livelihoods of European farmers (Orbán, 2024a, 2024d). Fidesz also opposes Ukraine’s accession to the EU, arguing that this would further destabilise European agricultural markets and cause additional damage to domestic farmers (Orbán, 2025e).

In this context, Fidesz criticizes the EU for imposing what it sees as unrealistic climate targets and regulatory burdens on farmers without providing adequate support or long-term stability (Orbán, 2024d). Orbán emphasizes that “[t]he price of climate change should not be paid by our farmers” (Orbán, 2024d), framing them as “the backbone of our economy and society” (Orbán, 2024d). Instead of increased quotas and restrictive environmental regulations, Fidesz’s position advocates for a climate policy that supports and strengthens rural communities through practical assistance and predictability (Orbán, 2024d). However, it expresses doubt about the EU’s willingness or ability to change course through dialogue and debate (Orbán, 2025e).

4.1.2.3 Party positions in the field of security

Defence and military

Fidesz views the development of an independent European defence capacity as an essential response to current security challenges (Orbán, 2024a). According to Orbán, the EU is currently “incapable of guaranteeing its own peace and security” (Orbán, 2024a), which makes institutional reforms in defence policy urgent. Rather than relying solely on alliances, the Hungarian government advocates for building a robust European defence industry and technological base. The Hungarian EU Presidency in 2024 had placed this goal at the centre of its agenda, supporting initiatives like the European Defence Industrial Strategy and the Defence Industrial Plan to strengthen Europe’s capabilities. Hungary presents itself as a successful example of this strat-

egy: with defence spending reaching 2.5% of Gross Domestic Product and significant investments in military innovation, the country emphasizes cooperation with European defence companies and the establishment of advanced industrial capacities. Fidesz believes that such efforts can and should be replicated across other member states (Orbán, 2024a, 2025e).

Through its increased defence spending and military reform, Fidesz presents itself as a committed NATO member, but at the same time uses its position within the alliance to assert national political interests. For example, it is blocking cooperation with Ukraine and delaying accession in order to put pressure on other member states like Sweden (Orbán, 2024b; Szelényi, 2024, p. 65). NATO therefore serves Fidesz both for security policy integration and to assert national interests. Although Fidesz is committed to NATO, it also refuses to support operations beyond NATO territory and expects this opt-out to be politically respected (Orbán, 2024b). Regarding the war in Ukraine, Orbán affirms, “we won’t participate in NATO operations against the Russians in Ukraine” (Orbán, 2024b).

Fidesz maintains a firm rejection of supranational military structures and conscription-based initiatives at the EU level, favouring a national approach to defence policy. Proposals such as a European army or EU-wide conscription are labelled as “imperial” (Orbán, 2024b) and refused. Instead, the party supports cooperation based on voluntary commitments under national control, industrial coordination, market protection for European defence industries and restricted deployment strictly within European borders (Orbán, 2024b). As Orbán puts it, military cooperation should not mean surrendering “control over Hungarian blood” (Orbán, 2024b). Finally, Fidesz opposes the expansion of nuclear capabilities in Europe. In response to calls for a European nuclear arsenal, Orbán advocates disarmament over escalation, warning that such moves could turn Europe into a battleground for conflicts between major powers (Orbán, 2024b).

International relations

In international relations, Fidesz articulates a vision shaped by geopolitical pragmatism and a clear departure from the traditional liberal world order. Orbán frames the current global situation as a historical turning point, comparable in scale to the Peace of Westphalia, which signals the end of the Western, liberal-dominated order. According to Orbán, the decline of progressive liberalism in the US under the new administration and the global rise of powers like China and India mark the emergence of a multipolar world (Orbán, 2025e, 2025f). He criticizes Europe’s failure to adapt to these transformations, arguing that “[t]he world has changed, but we Europeans have not followed” (Orbán, 2025f), and describes the EU as caught in a state of “drift” (Orbán, 2025f) and isolation, unprepared for the geopolitical shifts (Orbán, 2025f). He argues

that the EU has distanced itself from major global actors by misguided policy choices: it is “in a trade war with China, a sanctions war with Russia, and a political war with the United States” (Orbán, 2025c). Additionally, he argues that the EU has weakened its relations with Africa, by promoting social policies that do not align with local values, like LGBTQ and gender policies. According to Orbán, this has weakened Europe and left it without credible influence (Orbán, 2025c).

Fidesz portrays Hungary’s strategic goal as avoiding the EU’s isolation by pursuing a foreign policy based on pragmatic cooperation, emphasizing cooperation with Russia, China and the US (Orbán, 2025c, 2025e). The government’s emphasis on “friends, cooperation, economic ties, business benefits and advantages in international politics” (Orbán, 2025e) reflects its desire to remain engaged globally, rather than becoming an isolated “loser” (Orbán, 2025e) in the new world order. Orbán points out the benefits of Hungary’s independent approach, highlighting strong foreign investment, with a focus on Chinese high-tech projects and economic partnership in Africa (Orbán, 2024b, 2025e). The research report from Szelényi (2024, p. 67) points out, that Hungary’s relationship with China under the Fidesz government is shaped by the ‘Opening to the East’ strategy, which prioritizes long-term political, economic and diplomatic cooperation with the country. This includes, for example, active support for the Belt and Road Initiative through major projects like the Belgrade–Budapest railway, as well as the protection of China’s interests in the EU, for instance by blocking joint statements that criticize the Chinese government. As a result, the Hungary has attracted significant Chinese investment. By aligning itself with emerging powers and avoiding the ideological entanglements that characterize EU policy, it becomes clear, that Hungary positions itself as a flexible and forward-looking player in the evolving international system. Orbán points out that “[i]n its foreign policy Hungary pursues its own interests and doesn’t base its position on the interests of others” (Orbán, 2024b).

Fidesz’s foreign policy emphasizes alignment with what Orbán calls the new “patriotic politics” (Orbán, 2025f) emerging globally, particularly under Donald Trump’s presidency (Orbán, 2025e, 2025f). Orbán describes the recent developments in the US as the emergence of a “patriotic, pro-peace, anti-migration, pro-family [p]resident” (Orbán, 2025e) and emphasizes that Trump’s leadership enhances the prospects for global stability and peace (Orbán, 2024c). He sees the changes in the US as part of a bigger trend toward sovereignty-focused, nation-first politics and traditional values, a transformation Hungary claims to have pioneered domestically since 2010 (Orbán, 2025e). Orbán summarizes Hungary’s position as follows: “we were Trump before Trump.” (Orbán, 2025e) and highlights that the political strategy now pursued by Donald Trump closely reflects Hungary’s vision from recent years (Orbán, 2025a). As a result, Hungary

positions itself as a close partner to the new American leadership, stressing that this partnership is crucial and extends beyond economic interests to what Orbán terms a ‘civilizational struggle’ between progressives and patriots (Orbán, 2025b). However, it should be noted, that before Donald Trump’s re-election, the relationship between Hungary and the US was rather distant, especially under Democratic governments such as Joe Biden’s, which Orbán openly criticised (Szelényi, 2024, p. 66).

Ukraine war and Russia relations

Fidesz takes a critical position on the EU’s strategy in the Ukraine war and its broader relations with Russia, calling for a fundamental shift away from the current approach (Orbán, 2024c, 2025f). In doing so, Orbán also draws a comparison, claiming that “if we had led Hungary the way the Commission has led Europe, we would have been ruined long ago” (Orbán, 2025f). From the Hungarian government’s perspective, the EU’s strategy of military and financial support for Ukraine has failed to achieve its objectives, while imposing significant costs on European economies (Orbán, 2024c, 2025e). Orbán argues that “we have lost this war” (Orbán, 2025f), emphasizing that sanctions have been ineffective and that the continuation of hostilities only prolongs instability and the war (Orbán, 2025e). Rather than aligning with the EU’s prevailing policy of military support for Ukraine, Orbán consistently advocates for a ceasefire and peace negotiations, while also opposing the use of economic sanctions against Russia (Orbán, 2025d, 2025e). In his view, the European Commission, and in particular its President Ursula von der Leyen, bears direct responsibility for this failure and therefore demands not only a policy shift but also political accountability at the highest institutional level (Orbán, 2024c). However, the party’s stance is marked by ambiguity, as it formally aligns with the EU by approving the sanctions packages, yet consistently questions their effectiveness, blocks specific measures like weapons delivery and maintains direct dialogue with Russian leadership (Szelényi, 2024, pp. 66-67).

According to Orbán, Ukraine is already strategically defeated and insisting on further support would be a costly mistake that would distract hundreds of billions of euros from other urgent challenges, such as migration or infrastructure development (Orbán, 2024c). Orbán also links the prolongation of the conflict to rising inflation, declining industrial output and the erosion of household incomes within the EU (Orbán, 2025e, 2025f). During an interview in March 2025, he emphasizes that Hungary alone has suffered significant losses, estimating that the war has cost Hungarian families around 2.5 million forints each, even though the country tried to stay out of direct involvement in the conflict (Orbán, 2025c). Orbán therefore criticizes Brussels for pursuing what it calls a “war strategy” (Orbán, 2025c) that benefits neither Ukraine nor Europe

and instead promotes a peace-oriented approach as the only viable alternative, similar to the one supported by the US and the Vatican (Orbán, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e). He thinks that “the continuation of the war is bad, dangerous and a mistake” (Orbán, 2025b), welcoming efforts at the United Nations and by the US administration to push for peace resolutions in a policy statement in March 2025 (Orbán, 2025b).

Moreover, Fidesz critiques the EU’s lack of geopolitical realism, accusing Brussels and the previous US administration of pursuing an aggressive NATO expansion policy, that provoked the conflict in the first place. While the US has, in Orbán’s view, recognized the limits of military engagement and shifted towards promoting a ceasefire, the EU is seen as “a toothless lion” (Orbán, 2025c), lacking both political power and financial independence, increasingly burdened by unsustainable debt (Orbán, 2025c). As Orbán summarizes the situation: “The United States has the power, the EU has no power; the Americans have the tools, the EU has no tools.” (Orbán, 2025c).

In terms of relations with Russia, Orbán has repeatedly emphasized that Hungary is not “pro-Russian” (Orbán, 2024c) but firmly “pro-peace” (Orbán, 2024c), and frames Hungary’s stance as one based on historical experience and national interest rather than ideological alignment. He points to Hungary’s painful history with Soviet domination to underline that genuine pro-Russian sentiment is impossible among Hungarians (Orbán, 2024c). Rather than supporting either side, Orbán describes the conflict as a “fratricidal war” (Orbán, 2024c) between Russians and Ukrainians. For Hungary, the main priority is to stop the fighting as soon as possible and prevent the war from escalating into a wider European or global conflict (Orbán, 2024c). Finally, Orbán claims that cooperation with Russia is acceptable as long as it doesn’t violate EU sanctions, and points to what it sees as hypocrisy in some Western countries that criticize Russia publicly while continuing business relations behind the scenes (Orbán, 2024b).

Regarding Ukraine’s possible accession to the EU, Fidesz expresses serious concerns and warns that admitting a country at war would not only bring conflict into the EU but would also entail unsustainable financial burdens (Orbán, 2025f). In an interview in March 2025, Orbán predicts that Hungary and other member states would face significant costs in supporting Ukraine’s reconstruction, maintaining its state functions and financing its military, which would strain European budgets further. He estimates that Hungarian households would bear an additional annual cost of approximately 500,000 forints per family to support Ukraine’s membership. Highlighting Hungary’s stance, Orbán states that EU enlargement requires unanimity, and Hungary will not support Ukraine’s membership without consulting its citizens, signalling a national referendum on the issue (Orbán, 2025c). In conclusion, Fidesz argues that the EU has

become "the sick man of Europe" (Orbán, 2025e), increasingly incapable of ensuring peace and security on the continent or in its immediate neighbourhood, as exemplified by its failure to manage the war (Orbán, 2025e).

4.1.2.4 Party positions on EU spending and funding mechanisms for climate and security

Fidesz argues that the EU has repeatedly used successive crises, from the financial crisis and migration to the energy crisis and war, to justify greater centralisation of power in Brussels, including increasing control over budgetary policies and the allocation of funds. In this context, Fidesz takes an extremely critical stance towards the EU's fiscal and budgetary policies, describing them as instruments of political coercion and centralisation, which pose a threat to national sovereignty (Orbán, 2025f). Orbán claims that "anyone who steps out of line, who defends the nation-state framework, is threatened with the withdrawal of EU funds" (Orbán, 2025f), reflecting the party's belief that Brussels uses financial tools such as sanctions, fines and financial penalties to put pressure on governments that oppose deeper integration (Orbán, 2025e). According to Fidesz, this fiscal pressure jeopardises democratic legitimacy, as it eliminates national parliaments in favour of an unelected bureaucracy (Orbán, 2025f).

Fidesz's criticism focuses, for example, on the allocation of public funds by the EU to non-governmental organisations that campaign for a federal Europe, which Orbán describes as "an attempted coup against national parliaments" (Orbán, 2025f), and underlines Fidesz's concerns about the erosion of national sovereignty (Orbán, 2025f). The party accuses both Brussels and external partners, such as the US, of using financial resources to influence domestic politics and promote liberal values. It considers the use of EU money for such purposes as a misuse of contributions from member states like Hungary (Orbán, 2025a).

The broader narrative frames EU fiscal policy not as a vehicle for collective prosperity, but as a mechanism that exacerbates inequality between member states while advancing a centralized, ideologically driven agenda. This criticism extends, for example, to the economic consequences of the war, which, according to the party, have imposed significant financial burdens on Hungarian households despite the country's policy of non-involvement and call for peace (Orbán, 2025c). In this context, Fidesz also warns that EU agricultural subsidies could be cut in order to finance military aid to Ukraine. This would disproportionately affect farmers in less prosperous member states, such as Hungary, and further emphasize the Union's distorted budgetary priorities (Orbán, 2024b).

Finally, at the institutional level, Fidesz also criticizes the EU's increasing centralization tendencies of fiscal and budgetary control, pointing out that strategies such as Europe 2020 and the EGD have failed to deliver the promised results and have led to further bureaucratic overregulation, for example, of national spending decisions, that undermine member states' sovereignty. Instead of rethinking these approaches, Brussels is responding by expanding its powers and imposing stricter financial and legal constraints on member states, a move that Orbán interprets as punitive. This overregulation, he argues, is typical of the EU's general dysfunction (Orbán, 2025e). This shows, that Fidesz's criticism extends beyond fiscal measures to a broader scepticism toward the trajectory of European integration itself.

4.1.3 Germany: Alternative for Germany

4.1.3.1 Historical development and ideological orientation

Among the cases studied, the AfD stands out as the youngest right-wing populist party but has grown with remarkable speed. For a long time, far-right parties in Germany struggled to gain political influence, largely due to a combination of institutional barriers, societal and political resistance and internal party divisions (Weisskircher, 2025, p. 154; Wiliarty, 2021, pp. 144-147, 151). While many neighbouring Western European countries such as Austria and France saw the rise of radical right parties from the 1990s onward, Germany remained largely resistant. Although some far-right parties like the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany) and Die Republikaner (The Republicans) achieved some regional success, they failed to gain lasting national relevance, until the emergence of the AfD in 2013 marked a turning point (Arzheimer, 2023, p. 140).

The AfD was officially founded on 6 February 2013, although its actual roots reach back further. Back in 2010, the 'Plenum of Economists' was formed as a reaction to the German government's eurozone bailout policies under Chancellor Angela Merkel, particularly in reaction to the first Greek rescue package. From this initiative emerged the non-partisan 'Bürgerwille Alliance' in 2012, which continued to voice opposition against European fiscal policy. In autumn 2012, the 'Wahlalternative 2013' association was formed, which served as a platform for EU and euro critics, especially of former CDU members and conservative economic experts. After initial attempts to collaborate with the Free Voters failed in the state elections in Lower Saxony, this association ultimately resulted in the formation of the AfD, which saw itself as a political response to the German government's so-called 'no alternative' euro policy. Among

its most prominent founding members were Bernd Lucke, Konrad Adam and Alexander Gauland. After its founding, the AfD quickly gained members, which was largely driven by the high level of media attention. In the 2013 federal election, the party narrowly missed the five-percent threshold with 4.7% but achieved its first success in the 2014 European election with 7.1% (Kleinert, 2018, pp. 17-19, 21; Roch, 2023, pp. 166-167).

Although the AfD initially positioned itself as a neoliberal, national-liberal alternative to the established political parties and tried to distance itself from right-wing extremist and xenophobic movements, tensions quickly arose within the party over its political course (Weisskircher, 2025, p. 155). In particular, the national-liberal wing around Bernd Lucke, which favoured a moderate approach, increasingly came into conflict with national-conservative forces that demanded a stronger focus on migration and conservative social policies. The conflict escalated from 2014 onwards, when the AfD achieved double-digit results in state elections in the east and entered the state parliaments in Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg. This increased the influence of national-conservative, migration-critical currents under leading figures such as Frauke Petry, Alexander Gauland and Björn Höcke (Kleinert, 2018, pp. 21-24). The public rapprochement of certain party representatives with racist movements such as PEDGIA further exacerbated problems within the party. The increasing polarisation led to the formation of the right-wing 'Flügel' and Lucke's resignation from the party in 2015 after an internal power struggle with Frauke Petry, who subsequently continued to lead the party together with Jörg Meuthen. In public perception, this was seen as a shift of the AfD to the right (Arzheimer, 2023, pp. 144-145; Kleinert, 2018, pp. 23-27).

The refugee crisis starting in 2015, particularly Merkel's choice to open Germany's borders, was a decisive moment for the rise of the AfD. Through its clear rejection of Merkel's refugee policy, its growing criticism of the issue of migration and its identity-political narratives, the party succeeded in attracting many new supporters and gaining political ground, especially among people who felt no longer represented by the established parties. Increasing electoral successes in state elections, particularly in eastern Germany, but also in other parts of the country, reflected this trend (Kleinert, 2018, pp. 27-28; Weisskircher, 2025, pp. 159-160). However, internal conflicts regarding the party's stance on the right-wing spectrum persisted, particularly between the pragmatic forces around Frauke Petry and the growing right-wing 'Flügel' led by Höcke, as well as between Frauke Petry and co-leader Jörg Meuthen (Kleinert, 2018, pp. 29-31). The programmatic focus of the AfD gradually shifted from criticism of the euro towards migration and Islam-critical positions, accompanied by a fundamental criticism of the political elites (Roch, 2023, p. 167; Wiliarty, 2021, p. 151). After the 2017 federal elections, in which

the AfD entered the German Bundestag for the first time as the third strongest party with 12.6%, Petry resigned due to her lack of support, and Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel took over the leadership of the parliamentary group. With Alexander Gauland as the new co-leader of the party, the AfD continued its shift further to the right and its ideological radicalization (Kleinert, 2018, p. 34; Roch, 2023, p. 184; Wiliarty, 2021, p. 151). After winning seats in the 2018 state elections in Bavaria and Hesse, it achieved parliamentary presence across all German federal states (Kinski & Poguntke, 2019, pp. 1-2). This development was followed by a solid result in the 2019 European elections, where the party received 11.0 % of the vote (Roch, 2023, p. 167).

Although the AfD suffered losses in the 2021 federal election, dropping to 10.3% and becoming only the fifth largest faction in the Bundestag, it remained a stable actor, particularly in eastern Germany (Hansen & Olsen, 2024, p. 643; Roch, 2023, p. 167). In the following years, the party's public image became even more radicalised, with the result that the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classified AfD regional associations in several eastern German states as 'gesichert rechtsextrem' ('certainly extreme right'). In addition to its strong anti-migration stance, the party increasingly used climate scepticism and opposition to progressive gender policies as key tools for political mobilization. By 2024, the party signalled its growing ambition by nominating Alice Weidel as its first official chancellor candidate. In the 2025 federal election, the AfD achieved its strongest result to date with 20.8% and established itself as the second strongest force in parliament (The Federal Returning Officer, 2025). Although there have been isolated cases of cooperation at the local level, the AfD is still excluded from political partnerships and continues to operate as an opposition party (Weisskircher, 2025, pp. 152, 155, 160-163). However, this historical development shows, that the AfD managed to establish itself permanently in the German party system despite internal disputes and recurring scandals. In the 2024 European election, the AfD further expanded its support and secured second place nationwide behind the CDU/CSU with 15.9% of the vote (European Parliament, 2024c). Table 3 illustrates the electoral performance of the AfD in both general and European elections between 2013 and 2025, which highlights the steady increase in the party's vote share.

Table 3: Electoral results of AfD in general and European elections (Own illustration)

Year	General elections results (%)	European elections results (%)
2013	4.7	–
2014	–	7.1
2017	12.6	–
2019	–	11.0
2021	10.3	–
2024	–	15.9
2025	20.8	–

In recent years, the AfD's stance toward the EU has changed noticeably, depending on the political context. While the party initially focused on economic criticism, especially during the eurozone crisis, it later adopted a more nationalist tone during the refugee crisis, emphasising cultural identity and border protection. More recently, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the AfD's rhetoric became increasingly conspiratorial, portraying the EU as a distant, elite-driven institution acting against national interests. This shift shows that the party's Euroscepticism is not based on a fixed ideological position, but is strategically adapted to current events, which has helped the party to remain relevant by continuously reshaping its EU criticism in line with public debates. It also reflects a broader trend of radicalisation in the party's messaging, moving from an initially soft, reform-oriented Euroscepticism toward more hard and system-critical positions (Roch, 2023, pp. 549-550; 2024, pp. 187-188).

4.1.3.2 Party positions in the field of climate

Climate policy and climate change

In its programmes, the AfD fundamentally rejects the current climate and energy policies of the EU, which it portrays as ideologically driven and “misguided development” (Alternative für Deutschland [AfD], 2023, p. 8), with which the EU is pursuing an isolated international path (AfD, 2023, pp. 8, 40). The party argues that the concept of human-caused climate change is used “as a pretext for the EU to intervene in all areas of life in a regulatory manner” (AfD, 2023, p. 8) and that the policies are intentionally designed to cause fear and restrict individual freedoms (AfD, 2025, p. 78). Common to all documents is therefore a fundamental opposition to EU initiatives like the EGD and ‘Fit for 55’, which are described as ‘destructive’ for the European and particularly the German economy, with no meaningful effect on the global climate (AfD, 2023, pp. 8, 24; 2025, p. 79). The AfD labels ‘Fit for 55’ as a “dystopia of an eco-socialist Brussels liability and redistribution state” (AfD, 2023, p. 40) that enforces a radical transformation of society and the economy through binding emission targets without considering feasibility. The objective of reducing CO₂ emissions by 55% by 2030 in comparison to 1990 levels is seen as unrealistic, given that only 24% has been achieved over the past three decades. It claims that the associated European Climate Law adopted in 2021 will enable Brussels to bypass national parliaments and directly interfere with citizens' lives, while promoting further centralized control over the economy and reducing democratic control (AfD, 2023, p. 40).

According to the AfD, CO₂ is essential for life, because it promotes plant growth and thus global food security (AfD, 2023, p. 39; 2025, p. 77). As a result, the party strongly opposes CO₂ pricing, whether through emissions trading or direct carbon taxes, and rejects the planned Carbon

Border Adjustment Mechanism of the EU, which would add CO₂ fees to imported products to match EU environmental regulations. They argue it would raise consumer prices, harm prosperity and risk trade conflicts due to perceptions of protectionism (AfD, 2023, p. 27; 2025, p. 14). Throughout their programme, the AfD frames CO₂ reduction targets and EU emission limits as unrealistic and criticizes what they call a “unscientific climate hysteria” (AfD, 2023, p. 34), that undermines rational debate (AfD, 2023, pp. 34, 41). That is why they oppose the EU’s plans to introduce widespread CO₂ pricing across all sectors, such as industry, transport and agriculture, arguing that this will raise energy prices as “a first sign of green world salvation” (AfD, 2023, p. 40) and create dependency on state support (AfD, 2023, pp. 40-41). One example of this is the recent increase in truck tolls linked to CO₂ emissions, which they claim drives up the cost of goods and harms consumers (AfD, 2025, p. 44). Finally, they believe that abandoning CO₂-focused measures would better protect Germany’s economic future and competitiveness and at the same time reduce unnecessary debt for future generations (AfD, 2025, pp. 54, 57).

The AfD also questions the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change, claiming that climate fluctuations are a natural phenomenon that has always existed and are results from a variety of natural factors (AfD, 2025, p. 77), by arguing that “since the beginning of human settlement in Europe, people have always adapted to climate changes” (AfD, 2023, p. 39). In their view, the role of human influence remains scientifically unclear, making it unjustifiable to base costly projects, like the energy transition, on uncertain assumptions (AfD, 2023, pp. 39-40). Climate change is just seen as “a political agenda to tax the air we breathe” (AfD, 2023, p. 40). The party references the *World Climate Declaration* that was signed by thousands of experts, including Nobel Prize winners, who reject the notion of a climate crisis, and criticizes institutions like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for allegedly unreliable models and exaggerated forecasts. They argue that observed climate changes are within historical norms (AfD, 2023, p. 39; 2025, p. 77). Climate extremes like more frequent natural disasters are, in the AfD’s view, not increasing, and where disasters do occur, they attribute the damages to political failures in infrastructure and urban planning rather than to climate change. Public money is wasted on ideological climate projects abroad like “cycle paths in Peru” (AfD, 2025, p. 78), while local infrastructure is neglected. According to the party's criticism, this leads to billions in losses and corruption. In their view, adaptation to climate change, rather than costly intervention, is the only sensible response and this adaption should remain the responsibility of individual nations (AfD, 2023, pp. 39-40; 2025, p. 78).

In a broader critique, the AfD links the climate agenda to wider social and political transformations, that place increasing burdens on ordinary citizens (AfD, 2025, pp. 78-79). They view the current policies as part of the so-called ‘Great Reset’, warning that this is leading to a “dramatic reduction in prosperity and a totalitarian restriction of freedom” (AfD, 2023, p. 40). Socio-economic consequences are already visible, since energy-intensive industries are relocating abroad and jobs are disappearing, while climate policy only benefits political elites, international corporations and politically affiliated non-governmental organizations, who create industries and jobs for their own interests without any meaningful environmental benefits (AfD, 2025, p. 79). Finally, party opposes further CO₂-focused policies, demands an exit from the Paris Climate Agreement, abolition of all climate protection laws at national and EU level and proposes a return to a free-market economy that values prosperity and self-reliance (AfD, 2023, p. 42; 2025, pp. 46, 79).

Energy policy

In the energy sector, the AfD contends that Germany has experienced an energy crisis and a major decline in its international competitiveness as a result of decades of emphasis on what they refer to as "ideologically driven climate policy" (AfD, 2025, p. 40) and the preferential treatment of renewable energies. The party specifically attacks the withdrawal from coal and nuclear energy, claiming that this has caused power supply instability and has made Germany an energy importer with some of the highest electricity prices among industrialized countries (AfD, 2025, p. 40). Because of this attitude, the AfD rejects the expensive energy transition, arguing that climate change is natural, and emphasizes a return to conventional energy sources, including fossil fuels like coal, gas and oil (AfD, 2025, p. 77). The party claims, that “[f]ossil fuels were and are the basis of our prosperity” (AfD, 2023, p. 40).

As a result, the expansion of renewable energies, such as wind and solar, is rejected, because they are seen as unreliable, costly and insufficient to meet Germany’s energy demands (AfD, 2023, pp. 37, 41-42). In addition, the party criticizes the financial burden placed on citizens and industry through subsidies for renewables, new green technologies, like heat pumps and electric vehicles, as well as rising energy prices, which harm the economy and lead to higher living costs for citizens. According to the AfD, the current energy policy has made, for example, basic necessities like electricity, heating and food increasingly unaffordable. The party promises to reverse these trends and instead of expanding renewable energy at all costs, it advocates for technology neutrality and requires new technologies to prove their environmental and economic viability without state support (AfD, 2023, pp. 40-41; 2025, p. 40).

At the core of the AfD's proposals is a call for a "renationalization of energy policy" (AfD, 2023, p. 42). According to the party, "[a]ffordable and secure energy is key to prosperity and progress" (AfD, 2023, p. 41). Therefore, they advocate for each country to independently secure its energy supply without ideological constraints. The programmes also call for a broad diversification of energy sources, including coal, natural gas, shale gas extraction and a revitalization of nuclear energy (AfD, 2023, pp. 41-42; 2025, pp. 13, 38). Nuclear power is highlighted as a proven, "environmentally friendly and cost-effective" (AfD, 2023, p. 41) technology, that remains essential for securing the long-term energy supply. Moreover, the party supports maintaining coal-fired power plants as a transitional solution until sufficient nuclear capacity is restored, which are also labelled as clean. Finally, it proposes lower energy taxes, the removal of regulatory barriers for nuclear energy and a renewed focus on nuclear research and international cooperation to rebuild technological expertise (AfD, 2023, pp. 41-42; 2025, pp. 13, 41).

In terms of geopolitics, the AfD calls for a restoration of energy trade relations with Russia, which includes the immediate lift of sanctions and the repair of the Nord Stream pipelines, since "[t]he Nord Stream project is of outstanding importance for the European energy supply" (AfD, 2023, p. 29). They argue that Russia was for long a reliable supplier, critical for Germany's energy-intensive industries, and that the sanctions have only deepened Germany's energy crisis (AfD, 2023, p. 29; 2025, pp. 40-41, 91-92). In contrast, they criticize the US for trying to block the repair of the Nord Stream pipelines and for pursuing energy policies that do not align with European and especially German interests. Overall, it becomes clear, that the AfD links energy policy to broader questions of sovereignty and warns that Germany becomes dependent on decisions made in Brussels or the US (AfD, 2023, p. 29, 40-41; 2025, p. 91).

Green technologies and innovation

The AfD rejects EU-led efforts to steer investments toward green technologies, viewing them as ideologically motivated and economically harmful (AfD, 2023, p. 24). According to the party, such policies undermine market competition and prioritize politically favoured technologies over economically viable ones. Germany, once considered a world leader in science and industry, is now portrayed as a shrinking economy that suffers from these policies, energy shortages and excessive dependence on subsidies. The AfD sees strict technology requirements and limited access to affordable fossil or nuclear energy as well as critical raw materials, such as rare earths, as key problems for this decline (AfD, 2025, p. 11). Instead of relying on expensive technologies like batteries or hydrogen, it wants a return to affordable energy and less state intervention and aims to strengthen Germany's industry through market-based solutions. The party also opposes the preferential treatment of electric mobility and the allocation of public

funds for its infrastructure, calling for an immediate end to such policies (AfD, 2025, pp. 42-43).

Transportation and mobility sector

In the field of transport, the AfD presents a clear opposition to what it views as “ideologically driven ban policy that favours or discriminates against certain modes of transport” (AfD, 2025, p. 42). This means across several areas, including road traffic, aviation and automotive regulation, the party consistently positions itself against what it sees as top-down attempts to reorganise mobility in the name of environmental goals and climate protection. In its recent party programmes, the AfD positions itself as a strong defender of car-based individual mobility and the automotive industry, presenting them as symbols of personal freedom and economic strength. From the AfD’s perspective, EU climate policies increasingly threaten this mode of transport by introducing restrictions (AfD, 2023, pp. 32-33, 41; 2025, pp. 41-42). A consistent theme is the defence of the internal combustion engine against European regulation. The AfD strongly opposes the EU’s planned phase-out of combustion engines by 2035 and rejects stricter emissions standards like Euro 7 (AfD, 2023, pp. 34, 41). Such policies, in the party’s view, threaten the existence of Germany’s car and automotive supply industry and the jobs it provides, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises. Electromobility is criticized not only for being heavily subsidized but also for its ecological footprint, especially regarding battery production (AfD, 2023, p. 34; 2025, p. 43). The party calls for “technology neutrality” (AfD, 2023, p. 23) at national and EU level, where market forces and not political bans determine the future of propulsion systems. It therefore rejects the current political favouritism towards electric vehicles, arguing that publicly funded charging infrastructure is unjustified and unfeasible due to limited grid capacity and inadequate nationwide coverage. Synthetic fuels are presented as a viable alternative that should be treated equally in terms of taxes and regulations (AfD, 2023, pp. 23, 34; 2025, p. 43).

In the aviation sector, the AfD takes a similarly critical view of EU initiatives, air traffic and ticket taxes or restrictions aimed at achieving unrealistic EU CO₂ reduction targets, claiming that they harm the sector without offering real environmental benefits. According to their position, international aviation plays a crucial role for Germany’s and Europe’s economy (AfD, 2023, p. 34; 2025, pp. 45-46) and should not fall victim to what they describe as an “unscientific climate hysteria” (AfD, 2023, p. 34). A recurring theme is the claim that German airports and airlines are being overburdened by politically motivated costs, leading to competitive disadvantages compared to other European countries and traffic shifts abroad. They also reject bans on domestic and short-haul flights that are based on ideological grounds (AfD, 2025, p. 45).

Building sector

The AfD takes also a clear critical stance against the EU's climate and energy policy as it relates to the building sector. The party emphasizes that the EU does not have legislative authority in this area and criticizes what it describes as attempts by the EU to exert political control through its energy agenda. According to the AfD, such efforts ignore national differences and impose unsuitable, one-size-fits-all rules on member states (AfD, 2023, p. 34). They argue that “[t]here can be no EU regulation that fits all buildings from Finland to Portugal” (AfD, 2023, p. 34). Specifically, the AfD fights the EU plans to require that new buildings be climate-neutral from 2030 onward and rejects the idea of transforming the entire building stock to be emission-free. This includes opposition to EU-proposed mandatory photovoltaic installations on new or renovated buildings, as well as to binding renovation requirements aimed at improving the energy efficiency of older properties. It sees these targets as unrealistic and disconnected from the actual needs of citizens, especially when it comes to affordable housing (AfD, 2023, pp. 34-35). It further calls for the removal of what it calls “ideology-driven costs” (AfD, 2025, p. 36), specifically criticizing measures such as the CO₂ tax, the Buildings Energy Act, and proposed bans on oil and gas heating systems, which it claims violate citizens' property rights, restrict individual freedoms, and drive up housing costs (AfD, 2023, p. 40; 2025, p. 36).

Agricultural policy

The AfD strongly opposes the EU's agricultural agenda, which it characterizes as overly bureaucratic and ideologically driven by green lobbying interest and “an ever-expanding and relentless EU centralism” (AfD, 2023, p. 36). According to the party, initiatives like the EGD, which is described as a “billion-euro redistribution machine” (AfD, 2023, p. 36), not only harm the economy and the countryside but also undermine the sovereignty of EU member states (AfD, 2023, p. 36; 2025, p. 73). At the heart of the AfD's critique lies especially a call for decentralization. They argue that environmental, agricultural and forestry policy must be tailored to the specific needs of regions and countries, rather than imposed through top-down EU mandates. Instead of encouraging sustainable development, current EU policies impose unrealistic regulations and create counterproductive incentives that threaten the existence of family farms (AfD, 2023, p. 36; 2025, p. 72). In this view, the EU has failed to balance environmental conservation with agriculture, as reflected in its CAP, which the AfD criticizes for promoting “ideologically driven disincentives and special interests” (AfD, 2023, p. 36). As a result, the AfD wants to reduce what it calls an “out-of-control bureaucracy” (AfD, 2025, p. 73) and ensure regionally adapted policies that prioritize food security and the survival of traditional farming structures. EU interference in farming practices, for example, in crop rotation decisions or

fertilizer use, should be ended. The AfD seeks to strengthen the role of farmers by reducing external control, supporting fair market conditions and ensuring sustainable incomes across generations (AfD, 2023, pp. 36-37; 2025, pp. 73-75).

A strong focus is also placed on land-use conflicts between agriculture and climate goals. The AfD rejects the conversion of productive farmland into areas for renewable energy production, such as wind parks, solar installations or agrivoltaics, claiming that this contributes to land loss and threatens domestic food production (AfD, 2023, pp. 36-37; 2025, pp. 39, 80). According to the party, this shift makes agriculture to an “assistant in an already failed energy transition experiment” (AfD, 2023, p. 37).

Environmental conservation

A central concern in the environmental policy is the protection of landscapes from what the AfD views as the destructive effects of renewable energy expansion. The party opposes land use policies that prioritize climate goals over environmental protection, warning of negative ecological consequences (AfD, 2023, p. 35). It positions itself especially against the expansion of wind energy, emphasizing the risks it sees for the nature, wildlife and public health (AfD, 2025, p. 80). They criticize, for instance, the deaths of animals like birds and insects as an unacceptable “collateral damage of the left-green energy transition” (AfD, 2025, p. 80). Wind energy is presented as a major environmental threat, that is responsible for damaging natural habitats like forests through deforestation and contributing to soil erosion. The party therefore calls for a moratorium on new wind energy permits until more environmental studies are conducted (AfD, 2023, pp. 37-38; 2025, pp. 80, 82-83). In contrast to large-scale renewable projects, the AfD promotes an environmental policy focused on maintaining intact landscapes with high biodiversity, minimal land sealing and natural water management systems, like rivers. Their concept is therefore based on resource conservation, such as clean air and water, as well as low land use, aiming to create more resilient and adaptable ecosystems in the face of changing weather conditions (AfD, 2023, p. 40; 2025, p. 72).

Additionally, the AfD consistently criticizes centralized EU control in environmental policy, advocating instead for national and regional responsibility. Regarding water protection, the party rejects the EU’s Water Framework Directive for imposing uniform limits across all member states, arguing that this centralized approach is too bureaucratic and poorly suited to regional conditions (AfD, 2023, p. 39; 2025, p. 83). Similarly, in forest management, the AfD stresses the importance of sustainable practices tailored to ecological and economic needs and

adapted to regional climate and landscape conditions, opposing EU-driven policies and “[p]lanning games far from national particularities” (AfD, 2023, p. 37).

4.1.3.3 Party positions in the field of security

Defence and military

Regarding national defence, the AfD sees the current state of the German armed forces as critical, citing years of underfunding, material and personnel shortages and the decline of essential defence capacities. It criticizes the so-called *Zeitenwende* (turning point) declared by the German government in February 2022, claiming that despite official acknowledgment of the Bundeswehr’s deficiencies to protect the federal territory, effective measures to rebuild the armed forces are still lacking (AfD, 2023, p. 31; 2025, p. 88). As a consequence, the party calls “for the development of an autonomous and efficient defence technology industry in Germany” (AfD, 2025, p. 88). To rebuild defence capabilities, it advocates for reintroducing conscription, improving personnel and equipment levels, expanding operational readiness, providing sufficient financial resources and introducing new weapons systems (AfD, 2023, p. 31; 2025, p. 88). The party also stresses the need for developing offensive cyber capabilities to counter modern security threats and to strengthen the infrastructure for civilian protection (AfD, 2025, p. 89). Preserving and expanding the domestic and European defence industries is another priority, with a focus on safeguarding key technologies and keeping production in Europe (AfD, 2023, p. 31).

With a critical view of deeper European integration, the party opposes efforts to standardize European foreign and security policy and rejects initiatives like the CFSP and the European External Action Service. Instead, it favours flexible coordination of European interests while safeguarding the sovereign authority, security interests and legal frameworks of nation states (AfD, 2023, pp. 28-29; 2025, pp. 86-87, 90). In the context of European cooperation, the AfD therefore rejects supranational integration in favour of intensified intergovernmental coordination and supports building a flexible network of sovereign European states that retain control over its political and military decisions, yet collaborate when their individual interests align and where beneficial (AfD, 2023, pp. 29-30). They summarize this vision with the call for “strategic autonomy” (AfD, 2023, p. 30) in security policy, asserting that Europe must be prepared to defend itself independently in an increasingly fragmented global order. They warn of the risks of dependence on external actors and advocate a clear formulation of national interests and a determined pursuit of sovereignty on the international stage (AfD, 2023, pp. 8-9, 30; 2025, p. 87).

In terms of strategic alignment, the AfD rejects the deployment of long-range weapons systems of the US in Germany and opposes the further eastward expansion of NATO and the EU. While it views NATO membership and participation in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe as an important pillar of security, the AfD argues that Europe must gradually build up strategic autonomy (AfD, 2023, p. 30; 2025, pp. 87, 91). The party stresses that NATO should remain strictly a defensive alliance and criticizes military interventions outside its traditional area unless they are mandated by the United Nations and aligned with German national interests. European cooperation in military procurement and the development of defence technologies is supported, but the party firmly rejects the idea of a supranational European army, emphasizing that national armed forces must remain the foundation of sovereignty. The AfD envisions a Europe capable of defending itself independently, with a strong Bundeswehr as the core of German and European security, and military action abroad limited to mandates that explicitly serve national interests (AfD, 2023, pp. 8, 30).

International relations

One noticeable point in their election manifestos is that the AfD criticizes Germany's value-driven foreign policy in the past, for failing to ensure security and preventing major conflicts in Europe. Instead, the party calls for a return to 'realpolitik', which means a foreign policy based on national interests and practical realities rather than ideological goals. Central to its vision is "a sovereign Germany, that guarantees freedom, justice and prosperity as well as the security of its citizens" (AfD, 2025, p. 86). The AfD advocates for a "Europe of Fatherlands" (AfD, 2025, p. 86), rejecting EU centralization in favour of a confederation that preserves national sovereignty while enabling selective coordination in external affairs (AfD, 2023, p. 28; 2025, p. 86).

The AfD's approach to international relations places therefore national interests at the centre of its vision for Germany's engagement with the world (AfD, 2025, p. 87). In its stance on China, the party acknowledges the country as one of Germany's most important trading partners and calls for expanding economic, scientific and cultural ties. At the same time, the party stresses the importance of balanced economic relations that protect national interests and prevent unfair competitive practices. By recognizing the global influence of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative', the party advocates for a more active German response, proposing infrastructure initiatives that would strengthen Germany's connectivity with Asia (AfD, 2023, pp. 29-30; 2025, pp. 92-93).

The AfD also considers relations with the US essential, particularly in the fields of economics, technology and science. Additionally, in its most recent manifesto of 2025 it welcomes the political changes in the new US administration, with Donald Trump as the new president, interpreting them as a move away from ‘climate ideology’ and ‘wokeness’, and sees the US as a key partner in defending free speech and combating internet censorship (AfD, 2025, p. 91). Nonetheless, it also highlights growing divergences between European and American interests, especially in energy policy. It calls for a partnership “on equal footing” (AfD, 2023, p. 29) and insists that Germany must pursue its foreign policy interests autonomously while coordinating closely with European allies to avoid becoming entangled in external conflicts. The aim is to empower Germany to reduce reliance on the US, eventually assuming full responsibility for its own territorial defence (AfD, 2023, pp. 29-30).

Regarding Europe’s immediate neighbourhood, the AfD emphasizes pragmatic partnerships over deeper political integration. It rejects Turkey’s accession to the EU on cultural grounds and calls for an end to EU membership negotiations. In broader regional policy, particularly towards North Africa and the Middle East, the AfD stresses the importance of stability and economic development as means to address migration flows, once again favouring bilateral initiatives over supranational structures (AfD, 2023, p. 30; 2025, p. 92).

The AfD’s broader vision for international relations embraces a multipolar world order and supports bilateral economic diplomacy focused on growth, prosperity and protecting domestic industries instead of relying on supranational frameworks (AfD, 2023, pp. 29, 31; 2025, p. 90). In trade and economic relations, instead of aligning with the EU’s collective sanctions regimes, the AfD advocates lifting the sanctions on Russia and Syria and is against any new restrictions on China, arguing that sanctions have disproportionately harmed Germany as an export-driven economy (AfD, 2023, pp. 8, 31; 2025, p. 14). Finally, it places national sovereignty and adherence to international law at the core of its foreign policy, highlighting non-interference and self-determination as key principles, that should be respected not only by external powers but also within the structures of the EU (AfD, 2023, p. 28; 2025, p. 86).

Ukraine war and Russia relations

Finally, the AfD asks for a major realignment of German and European foreign policy in its programmes, highlighting, for example, the consequences of the war in Ukraine for Europe’s security architecture. The party advocates for Ukraine to become a neutral state outside NATO and the EU, as stable peace is essential not only for security, but also for maintaining trade

relations and energy supplies. The AfD criticizes Germany's involvement in the conflict, particularly its military support and arms deliveries, which it claims weaken the defence capabilities of the Bundeswehr and escalate tensions rather than bringing peace to Europe (AfD, 2023, p. 8; 2025, pp. 87-88, 92). It therefore opposes sanctions against Russia, arguing that they harm European economies without contributing to conflict resolution. Instead, the party advocates for diplomatic solutions to end the war and the restoration of peaceful relations with Russia, emphasizing historical and economic ties, especially in the energy sector (AfD, 2023, pp. 29, 31; 2025, pp. 87, 91-92; Dempsey, 2024, pp. 61-62).

4.1.3.4 Party positions on EU spending and funding mechanisms for climate and security

From the AfD's perspective, the EU's budgetary policy is problematic in several aspects. The party is fundamentally opposed to an expansion of the EU budget and instead calls for a noticeable reduction in joint expenditure. In particular, it criticises large-scale funding programmes worth billions which, in its view, are primarily symbolic in nature and do not bring about any noticeable improvements for the citizens of the member states, such as the Cohesion Fund. Instead of forcing the EU into an active role as an investment actor, the AfD is in favour of shifting financial responsibility back to the nation states (AfD, 2023, pp. 27-28). It is particularly critical of EU initiatives that focus on climate protection, energy policy or social transformation. Programmes such as *Horizon Europe*, which has a budget of 95 billion euros over seven years and specifically promotes research on topics such as sustainability, mobility or 'smart' cities, are classified as ideologically driven. The party claims that political bodies influence the allocation of scientific funding and thus restrict freedom of research and technological diversity. Funding objectives such as climate resilience or the design of car-free cities are also not seen as technological advances, but as the expression of a political agenda that is imposed on the member states (AfD, 2023, pp. 49-50).

In addition, the AfD expresses clear opposition to the EU financial mechanisms introduced under the pretext of various crises such as the climate and gas crisis, migration and the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that the EU uses these crises to justify "financial packages of unprecedented size" (AfD, 2023, p. 41). A central element of the party's critique concerns the EU's joint debt mechanism, the NextGenerationEU fund, which it views as an unequal redistribution of wealth and burdens among EU member states under the pretext of crisis management. In addition, it is seen as undermining national fiscal sovereignty by centralizing borrowing at the EU level (AfD, 2023, p. 41). The AfD not only opposes centralized financial policies but is also critical of the EU's approach for addressing climate-related economic issues, especially the

strong promotion of electric mobility (AfD, 2025, p. 43). The party is calling for an immediate stop to the "one-sided preference for electromobility" (AfD, 2025, p. 43) and for an end to public funding of electric vehicle infrastructure. From this perspective, EU financial policies are seen as motivated by ideology and lacking economic balance (AfD, 2025, p. 43).

4.2 Cross-case comparison: Convergence and divergence in party positions on climate and security

The multi-case study revealed, that FdI, Fidesz and AfD are three parties, that challenge the current EU framework by emphasizing national sovereignty and questioning the balance between national interests and European integration. Their positions show how issues like economic competitiveness, national identity and security concerns are linked to current discussions about climate change and Europe's role in the world. The following table provides a comparative overview of the key background information on these parties, serving as a foundation for the subsequent cross-case analysis of their policy positions (see Table 4).

Table 4: Comparative overview of the background information on FdI, Fidesz and AfD (Own illustration)

Party	Year of foundation	Party leader	EP group
FdI (Italy)	2012	Giorgia Meloni	ECR
Fidesz (Hungary)	1988	Viktor Orbán	PfE
AfD (Germany)	2013	Alice Weidel & Tino Chrupalla	ESN

The aim of this thesis was to examine how the positions of right-wing populist parties in Europe, specifically AfD, Fidesz and FdI, converge or diverge with regard to European integration in the policy areas of climate and security. The comparative analysis of the positions of the three parties answers this first research question and shows a pattern of considerable ideological alignment across both climate and security fields, although there are nuanced differences in their strategic approaches and the intensity of their criticism and degrees of opposition. It shows that many of their positions align with theoretical expectations from the literature, while also revealing party-specific distinct features, which are presented in more detail below.

Results in the field of climate

In the area of climate, the shared critical perspective on the EGD and the EU's centralised approach to climate policy and energy policy serves as a central point of convergence among the three parties. They see the supranational climate governance as economically burdensome

and politically overreaching and argue that the current EU climate framework imposes disproportionate costs on national industries and fails to account for the diverse socio-economic conditions across member states. All three parties therefore advocate for a climate policy that prioritizes economic rationality, technological openness and industrial competitiveness over what they perceive as ideological and economically damaging environmental regulations. They criticize the one-sided promotion of electric mobility and stress the importance of diversifying energy sources, including the support for nuclear energy, biofuels and other alternative technologies. In the cases of Fidesz and the AfD, this also includes a continued reliance on fossil fuels as part of their energy strategy. Moreover, they argue that these policies should not endanger industrial jobs and economic competitiveness, particularly in energy-intensive sectors. A similar pattern emerges in their agricultural and environmental policies, where all three criticize Brussels for imposing overly bureaucratic, one-size-fits-all regulations that ignore national specificities and threaten key sectors like farming and traditional industries. Although a common scepticism towards deeper integration can be identified in principle, a closer look reveals differences in argumentation, depth of opposition and strategic positioning. While all three parties stress the principle of subsidiarity, they differ in tone, scope and ideological framing. FdI and Fidesz advocate for stronger national autonomy within the EU framework, whereas the AfD calls for a complete renationalization of all climate and energy policies. These differences reflect varying divergent ideas about how climate policy in Europe should be structured.

As already mentioned, the AfD adopts the most radical and ideologically framed position among the three regarding climate and energy policy and especially climate change. Its rejection of the EGD is not merely economically motivated but follows an overall ideological rejection of man-made climate change itself, labelling current climate policies and energy regulations as ideologically driven and economically harmful. The party links the issue with terms such as ‘climate hysteria’ and sees EU-wide climate protection as an instrument of globalist elites to discipline sovereign nation states. Unlike Fidesz and FdI, who at least acknowledge the climate problem in principle and seek to reshape the EU approach, the AfD proposes an outright rejection of the EU as a legitimate actor in environmental governance. It does not stop at criticising individual measures but aims to shift all climate policy competences back to the national level and completely abandon the emission reduction targets set by Brussels. Its opposition is therefore not only about the content of climate measures but also reflects a general criticism of the political establishment and the power structures of the EU. Its demands often remain programmatically radical, but conceptually vague. This is all the more remarkable given that the party is simultaneously calling for a return to fossil fuels without naming a realistic industrial or geopolitical strategy for this, apart from advocating a revival of energy ties with

Russia. Overall, the AfD's position presents EU climate and energy policy as a form of externally imposed constraint that endangers national interests and calls for a return to regionalised, market-oriented governance, that is guided by national priorities rather than supranational climate targets.

In contrast, Fidesz presents itself as deliberately pragmatic, though no less critical. The party does not deny climate change or the need to reduce emissions but argues for a more economically realistic approach of the EU policies that balance climate objectives with industrial viability and energy affordability. Orbán's main argument revolves around the claim that the current EU climate policy undermines industrial competitiveness by driving up energy costs and destabilizing traditional industries, which Orbán associates with what he terms 'woke capitalism', where ideology is placed over economic rationality. He points to the structural disadvantages of European industry compared to non-European competitors, particularly with regard to energy prices, and criticises the EU for its lack of an integrated industrial policy to accompany its climate agenda. Fidesz is therefore not constructing a fundamental counter-model to the European climate target, but is calling for an economically sensible, ideology-free implementation with national interests at the centre. This is a form of right-wing populist criticism that does not consist of total rejection, but rather selective resistance to centralised decision-making processes. In line with its emphasis on affordable energy, Fidesz continues, for example, to support energy cooperation with Russia and has repeatedly criticised EU sanctions that restrict access to Russian gas and oil. The party therefore pursues an opportunistic and also contradictory strategy, where on the one hand, climate change is not fundamentally denied, while on the other hand, ambitious EU climate targets like the EGD are sometimes blocked or delayed, for example, with reference to rising energy costs or unequal burdens for poorer member states. Overall, Fidesz envisions a European climate policy that is less centralized, more economically balanced and more respectful of national sovereignty, seeking to align environmental goals with industrial competitiveness and pragmatic governance.

Finally, FdI frames its opposition through the lens of economic nationalism and cultural identity. Meloni's party also rejects a centralised EU climate policy and warns of a threat to Italian industrial interests, expressing itself in very national-conservative tones and less system-critical ones. It advocates for member states to have greater flexibility in designing their own climate strategies according to their industrial structures and socio-economic contexts. Its criticism is primarily directed against the technocratic implementation of the EGD, rather than against the climate target itself. FdI refers to the EGD as 'eco-madness' initiated by the European left and

criticizes it for imposing what it sees as unrealistic goals and disproportionate burdens on European industries and citizens. At the same time, however, the party recognizes the importance of addressing climate change and promoting greater environmental awareness. Notably, FdI is also one of the few among the compared parties that is actively committed to the development of a circular economy and emphasizes sustainable resource management and waste reduction as key environmental objectives in its programmes. The party calls for an EU that respects national priorities and proposes a climate policy based on strategic investment, national planning and minimal interference from EU institutions. It also promotes energy independence through the diversification of sources, favouring stronger energy partnerships with regions like Africa over continued reliance on suppliers such as Russia. Overall, FdI's climate policy reflects a preference for nationally tailored solutions within the EU framework, which combines a commitment to environmental protection with a strong opposition to supranational regulation.

In conclusion, it can be said, that of the parties analysed, FdI and Fidesz can be considered comparatively more environmentally friendly, since both accept the reality of climate change and support environmental protection in principle. However, they avoid supporting direct climate action measures, like the EGD, and instead focus on broader, nationally beneficial environmental policies, that they can utilise for their ideological views on strengthening and protecting national sovereignty. In conclusion it therefore becomes clear, that across all three parties, climate policy is less about global climate goals and more about protecting national economic interests and limiting supranational interference. This stance reflects a broader populist logic as described by Mudde's ideational approach, in which the parties position themselves as defenders of the 'common people' against a distant, elitist establishment that, in their view, imposes costly and ideologically driven climate policies disconnected from the everyday concerns of citizens. Finally, the difference between the three parties may also be explained by the different opportunity structures they face, as FdI and Fidesz are currently in government and thus adopt more pragmatic approaches, while the AfD, as an opposition party, maintains a fundamentally strong oppositional and anti-institutionalist stance. Table 5 summarizes and contrasts the parties' positions on all key environmental, energy and climate-related issues, which were analysed in this study.

Table 5: Comparative overview of party positions on climate, energy and environmental policy (Own illustration)

Aspect	Fdi	Fidesz	AfD
Climate policy and climate change	- Rejects the EGD as ideologically and economically harmful - Supports realistic, industry-friendly climate measures - Advocates a pragmatic, national interest-driven approach	- Rejects the EGD as unworkable and economically harmful to EU industry - Criticizes 'ideological' EU climate agenda - Advocates for climate goals aligned with economic growth and national sovereignty	- Rejects the EU climate agenda (EGD, Fit for 55) as ideologically and economically harmful - Denies clear anthropogenic climate change; opposes CO₂ pricing, emissions trading and centralized EU climate law - Advocates for national sovereignty and adaptation-focused policies
Energy policy	- Supports a broad energy mix including use of nuclear, hydrogen, gas and renewables - Emphasizes national energy sovereignty and frames energy independence as strategic goal - Supports diversification and bilateral deals (not with Russia); cautious EU cooperation on energy infrastructure (e.g., RePowerEU)	- Supports a broad energy mix including use of nuclear, gas, oil and renewables - Opposes EU's energy sanctions and Russian energy decoupling, supports continued energy cooperation - Calls for affordable, reliable energy and diversified partnerships	- Rejects the energy transition and calls for a return to fossil fuels, coal and nuclear power as reliable, affordable and 'clean' sources - Criticizes renewables (wind, solar) as unstable and subsidy-dependent, blaming them for high prices - Opposes EU's energy sanctions against Russia and demands energy trade normalization with Russia, repair of Nord Stream - Calls for sovereign national control over energy policy
Green technologies and innovation	- Promotes investment in R&D for clean technologies (e.g. fusion) - Wants green investment excluded from deficit calculations	- Supports strategic investments in green tech (e.g. batteries, energy storages) - Sees Hungary as a model in linking innovation with competitiveness	- Opposes EU-driven green tech subsidies and market distortion - Supports free-market, technology-neutral innovation without state intervention
Transportation and mobility sector	- Opposes the EU's 2035 combustion engine ban - Favours technological neutrality (biofuels, hybrids) - Supports sustainable urban mobility and public transport	/	- Opposes the EU's 2035 combustion engine ban as a threat to Germany's auto industry and consumer freedom - Opposes political favouritism for e-mobility and public funding for changing infrastructure - Favours technological neutrality (synthetic and alternative fuels)
Circular economy	- Supports shift to circular economy - Favors incentives for waste reduction and modern recycling - Advocates waste-to-energy technologies	/	/
Building sector	- Rejects strict EU energy efficiency rules - Wants to revise the EU's 'green homes' directive - Supports gradual, incentive-based renovations	/	- Rejects EU renovation mandates and heating bans as costly & intrusive - Favors full national responsibility and affordable, non-EU-regulated housing policy
Agricultural policy	- Criticizes EGD, CAP rules and Nature Restoration Law for harming farmers - Calls for reform of EU's 'green ideology' to protect incomes and food sovereignty - Supports more flexible environmental standards	- Opposes EU climate regulations on farming - Warns of threats to food security and farmer livelihoods - Warns against Ukraine's accession as a threat to agricultural stability	- Criticizes EU agricultural policy (incl. CAP and EGD) for ideological overregulation that burdens farmers and threatens food security - Rejects land-use change for climate purposes (e.g. solar parks on farmland) - Advocates for regionalized, sovereignty-based agricultural policy tailored to local ecosystems and traditions without decentralization
Environmental conservation	- Rejects 'eco-madness' and supports practical, nationally beneficial conservation - Focus on disaster prevention and biodiversity - Favors afforestation, coastal restoration and water infrastructure	/	- Opposes wind power expansion due to its impact on the environment, biodiversity (e.g. animal deaths, deforestation) and rural communities - Criticizes EU-wide environmental planning and calls for national and local responsibility based on the principle of subsidiarity - Supports resource-conserving policies like sustainable forestry, river restoration and protection of cultural landscapes

Results in the field of security

In the area of security, similar patterns of scepticism toward European integration can be observed, since all three parties emphasize national sovereignty and intergovernmental coordination and reject an increased centralization of foreign and security policy decisions at the EU level in the future. However, they are again accompanied by significant divergences in strategic orientation, which will be explained in the following.

At its core, Fidesz advocates a defence policy based on national sovereignty, voluntary cooperation, and clearly defined geographic boundaries, firmly rejecting both a supranational EU defence structure, like an EU army or EU-wide conscription, and what it sees as an ideologically driven militarisation of European foreign and security policy. Regarding its foreign policy, Fidesz maintains a dual approach: while supporting NATO membership and cooperation within the alliance in principle, the party also seeks to diversify its international relations. This includes maintaining pragmatic ties with Russia and strengthening partnerships with non-Western actors such as China. This pragmatic, often referred to as ‘eastern opening policy’, is presented as a pursuit of Hungarian national interests and energy security, especially in light of the EU's sanctions against Russia. The party consistently criticizes the EU's excessive sanctions policy and ‘war strategy’, arguing that security decisions must reflect national economic dependencies. His foreign policy also includes open support for Donald Trump. It can be said, that Orbán and his party view international politics as an international competition for resources, where the foreign policy is characterised by an interest-driven mindset that favours bilateral relations over multilateral institutions (Szelényi, 2024, p. 65). Overall, Fidesz pursues a strategically independent path, particularly evident in its approach towards Russia, that contrasts sharply with the dominant view in the EU, which sees the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a clear threat to the European security order. The rejection of further escalation and the call for a pragmatic approach to Russia mark a deliberate distancing from European and transatlantic unity.

FdI, in contrast, follows an approach, that combines loyalty to traditional alliances with a strong sovereigntist emphasis on Italian strategic autonomy. This means, that the party maintains a very strong pro-NATO and Western-orientated stance despite its sovereignty-orientated rhetoric. It sees the transatlantic alliance as essential for Italy's security and backs NATO's principle of collective defence. It has also clearly condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine and supports continued support for Ukraine, thereby aligning itself closely – at least formally – with mainstream European positions on the conflict. However, this commitment appears to be motivated less by ideology than by strategy, given the FdI's previous ambivalence towards Russia and its now carefully constructed pro-Western image. A key part of FdI's foreign policy is also

Meloni's new close alignment with the US conservative camp, especially Donald Trump, which is used to strengthen Italy's international standing. FdI also promotes a model of selective integration in defence matters, supporting cooperation where necessary, for example, in joint military projects or common research initiatives, but insisting on preserving national decision-making power and autonomy where possible. This allows FdI to appear cooperative on the European stage while avoiding any real transfer of sovereignty. At the same time, FdI calls for a more capable and autonomous European foreign policy within the NATO framework and advocates for the EU to strengthen its geopolitical influence, common foreign policy and defence capabilities, especially in light of rising global threats. The EU should develop the authority and cohesion necessary to meet these challenges, safeguard peace as well as protect European interests on the world stage. Overall, FdI does not reject European integration in CFSP, but wants it to respect national sovereignty, which is why the party tries to influence EU policy from within rather than fighting against it entirely. In summary, FdI envisions a sovereigntist yet strategically cooperative outlook of the CFSP within the European framework, which allows the party to appear constructive while still appealing to its nationalist and populist base.

The AfD once again diverges more sharply from the other two and adopts the most isolated stance in its security policy regarding European integration. The party is clearly opposed to the institutionalisation of a CFSP and the development of a coherent European foreign policy framework. It questions the continued relevance of the NATO and favours the development of a European security structure based on national sovereignty and intergovernmental coordination rather than centralized institutions. The party calls for strengthening national defence through rearmament and rejects any supranational military integration at the EU level like a European army. Its foreign policy vision also focuses on pragmatic national as well as sovereigntist interests and promotes a multipolar world order, in which Europe maintains balanced relations with the major powers without being dominated from outside. Consequently, the party opposes further EU centralization and seeks for closer bilateral relations with powers like the US under Trump and Russia, calling for an end to military aid for Ukraine. Overall, the AfD's foreign policy stance appears primarily driven by ideological considerations and a fundamental distrust of Western multilateral structures rather than coherent strategic planning. To provide a clearer and compact overview, table 6 outlines how FdI, Fidesz and AfD position themselves on key aspects of EU foreign and security policy, more specifically in the areas of defence, international relations and the Ukraine conflict.

Table 6: Comparative overview of party positions on foreign and security policy (Own illustration)

Aspect	Fdi	Fidesz	AfD
Defence and military	- Supports development of autonomous European defence capabilities and joint defence industry policy - Advocates increased EU defence cooperation (e.g. research, common projects), while preserving national command - Strong supporter of NATO; calls for higher defence spending in line with alliance standards	- Calls for stronger, autonomous European defence capabilities, supports defence industry development - Supports national defence autonomy within NATO and increased military spending - Rejects supranational EU military structures, a European army and compulsory conscription - Favours industrial cooperation under national control and restricts military engagement to European territory	- Advocates for strategic autonomy in defence - Calls for rebuilding national defence through conscription, investment in better equipment and a strong domestic defence industry, especially to rebuild the Bundeswehr - Opposes a European army and rejects deeper EU integration in security and defence structures; supports intergovernmental cooperation based on national interests - Supports NATO as a defensive alliance but rejects U.S. missile systems in Germany and NATO expansion eastward
International relations and foreign policy	- Frames foreign policy around Italian sovereignty and national interest, especially in the Mediterranean region - Promotes EU-African cooperation (Mattei Plan) to counter migration and extremism - Highlights close ties with US conservatives, especially Donald Trump, as a sign of Italy's renewed global relevance - Upholds transatlantic alliance and Western values	- Promotes multipolar, interest-based diplomacy and strategic, bilateral partnerships (US, China) - Strong alignment with Trump-era US policy ('We were Trump before Trump') - Supports Chinese investments and Belt & Road initiative - Opposes liberal EU global policies	- Advocates for realist, interest-based foreign policy over value-driven EU diplomacy - Supports a multipolar world order; rejects centralized EU foreign policy and prefers sovereignty-based cooperation - Supports strong, balanced relations with the US and China, while maintaining German sovereignty and strategic independence
Ukraine war and Russia relations	- Strong support for Ukraine against Russian aggression - Backs EU/G7 sanctions and aid packages - Calls for reduction of energy ties with Russia - Shifted from earlier pro-Russian stance to clear alignment with Western partners post-2022 invasion	- Rejects EU's pro-Ukraine war strategy and criticizes Russia sanctions - Advocates immediate ceasefire and peace talks - Opposes Ukraine's EU accession due to financial and security burdens - Maintains dialogue with Russia, positions Hungary as 'pro-peace' not 'pro-Russia'	- Opposes arms deliveries to Ukraine and criticizes Russia sanctions as ineffective and harmful to Europe - Calls for Ukraine's neutrality outside NATO and the EU and a ceasefire - Supports renewed pragmatic ties with Russia, particularly in energy trade

When comparing the empirical results with the existing literature, it becomes clear that there are significant overlaps, especially with regard to the fact that right-wing populist parties do not form a coherent bloc in the context of EU foreign and security policy. Although they all emphasize national sovereignty and are sceptical of further centralization, they respond differently to international crises and alliances. FdI, for example, has significantly moderated its position since entering government, aligning closely with NATO and Western partners. This adaptation confirms the observation in the literature that such parties often shift positions when they gain power. In contrast, Fidesz uses foreign policy rhetorically to defend its sovereignty narrative, while pragmatically maintaining relations with both Western and Eastern powers. The AfD remains the most isolationist approach, rejecting supranational coordination and proposing a strong nationalist foreign policy vision, that is primarily concerned with strengthening national defence capacities. This variation highlights that party-specific context, governing responsibility and external events strongly influence their positioning.

Results regarding EU spending and funding mechanisms

In terms of funding and financial mechanisms in the areas of climate and CFSP, the three parties are similarly critical of the current EU approach (see Table 7). While none of them reject the idea of investments in principle, they oppose centralized EU funding strategies, which they believe prioritize ideological objectives over pragmatic needs. Instead, they advocate for financial instruments that are closely aligned with national interests and economic viability. FdI supports selective EU funding but insists that it must respect national sovereignty and subsidiarity, particularly by allowing member states to adapt environmental and security investments to their national circumstances. The party warns against overly ideological climate spending that serve abstract climate targets disconnected from economic realities. Fidesz is also highly critical of the EU's increasing financial centralization and frames EU funds as political tools used to exert pressure on dissenting governments, calling for more national control over the allocation of resources. This financial centralization is, according to Fidesz, part of a broader trend where the EU uses common funds to control how member states spend money, instead of respecting national priorities. The party also portrays the EU's financial policies not as neutral instruments of solidarity, but as ideologically motivated tools used to reshape national politics, for example, through funding NGOs that support a federalist agenda, which the party views as an indirect attack on national sovereignty. The AfD takes a similar stance and rejects supranational funding mechanisms like the NextGenerationEU fund, viewing them as a threat to fiscal sovereignty and a redistribution of national wealth. It argues that the EU repeatedly uses crisis situations, like the energy or gas crisis, to expand its control over financial and budgetary decisions and

enforce financial mechanisms that would not be politically acceptable under normal circumstances. Among all three parties, the promotion of national autonomy in financial decisions reflects a general scepticism toward redistribution at the EU-level and a preference for investments that bring clear, tangible benefits to domestic industries and societies. However, at the same time, these parties often do not mention that their countries also benefit from EU funding, for example, through agricultural or regional development funds, even though they strongly criticize the way the EU manages and distributes money.

Table 7: Comparative overview of party positions on EU spending and funding mechanisms (Own illustration)

Aspect	Fdi	Fidesz	AfD
EU spending and funding mechanisms	– Supports EU funds for industry, environment, and disaster prevention – Opposes symbolic climate projects – Emphasizes national alignment of EU investments	– Views EU budgetary control as coercive and centralizing – Opposes use of funds to pressure national governments – Criticizes conditional funding and NGO support as anti-sovereign – Demands greater sovereignty in budget allocation and fund use	– Rejects EU joint debt (e.g. NextGenerationEU) as fiscal centralization and unfair redistribution – Criticizes climate-related funding and green investment as ideologically driven and wasteful – Demands full national budgetary sovereignty and an end to crisis-based EU expansion of spending powers

4.3 Implications for European integration in climate and security

4.3.1 Consequences for right-wing unity and European integration dynamics

Throughout the comparative analysis it became clear, that in both climate and security policy, the three parties oppose deeper integration and the transfer of competences to European institutions. They frame EU policies as disconnected from national realities and argue that critical policy areas, like the ones analysed, must remain under the control of member states. Although there are important differences in the rhetoric and policy details of Fidesz, Fdi and AfD, the comparative analysis shows substantial ideological convergence, particularly on climate and energy, that go beyond the national context and group affiliations in the EP. All three parties share a critical stance toward supranational governance and oppose key EU initiatives such as the EGD and ‘Fit for 55’, advocating for stronger national sovereignty and a rebalancing of competences between the EU and its member states. This supports recent scholarship suggesting a growing programmatic alignment among right-wing actors around ‘green scepticism’. As a result, they uniformly oppose strict EU climate mandates and emphasize the need to align environmental and energy policies with national economic interests. They also reject centralized EU spending and emphasize the need for financial mechanisms that are in line with national priorities and control. This attitude also aligns with the core theoretical foundations of

right-wing populism, especially the hostile ‘people vs. elite’ narrative, that portrays the EU as a distant authority that acts against the interests of nation-states and their citizens. In addition to serving as a substantive rejection, criticism of the EU is also used, especially by the AfD, as a narrative for identity formation, with opposition to ‘those at the top’.

In the area of security, they reject centralized European decision-making and emphasize strategic autonomy, albeit they have different degrees of commitment to traditional alliances like NATO, international partnerships and joint cooperation. Parties like Fidesz and FdI support the idea of a stronger European defence rather than outright denying the EU’s role in security. However, they want this to happen in a way that protects national sovereignty and avoids giving too much power to EU institutions. This shows a new form of how populist parties interact with the EU and is consistent with a broader trend observed in recent studies, which indicates that populist parties often try to reshape the EU according to their own ideas, rather than leave it. The results of this thesis support the argument that many populist parties are moving away from strong rejection (hard Euroscepticism) and towards a more moderate, flexible approach (soft Euroscepticism), especially when they take on government responsibility.

In addition, despite the common right-wing populist framing of the issues, there are clear differences in their approach to European integration. While Fidesz and FdI tend to be selectively critical of integration in the analysed areas and emphasise their own economic and cultural interests, the AfD is fundamentally opposed to European integration in nearly all aspects of the two policy areas. These differences are not only of a strategic nature but may also be an expression of their different proximity to government: Fidesz, as a long-standing governing party, and FdI, as the current governing party, remain more closely tied to the realities of international cooperation than the opposition-orientated AfD. Especially FdI has taken a more pragmatic approach since coming to power, particularly in the areas of security and energy policy. These results confirm the context-dependent nature of the EU-positions of right-wing populist parties, which has been described in the theory section. National political opportunity structures, such as government status or electoral pressure, have a major influence on whether European integration is presented more as a threat or an opportunity. However, these different approaches are rather tactical than ideological, since their core visions for Europe – a Europe of sovereign nations that protects national interests and identities – are closely aligned. This same view underscores the potential for deeper cooperation among right-wing populist forces in Europe and points to a broader trend that can challenge the existing model of European integration.

Finally, the case comparison highlights a growing functional contradiction: parties that ideologically challenge the legitimacy of the EU are becoming increasingly professionalized and

coordinated at the EU level. The rise of right-wing populist parties therefore does not signal a retreat from European politics, but rather a strategic attempt to reshape the EU from within, by promoting a vision of Europe based on national sovereignty, cultural identity and limited integration. This reorientation goes hand in hand with a growing awareness among these parties of the institutional mechanisms through which they can exert influence, even as they continue to criticize the EU's growing centralizing tendencies. One key tool is the use of unanimity requirements in the Council, particularly in sensitive areas like foreign policy, enlargement or fiscal decisions. Fidesz, for example, has repeatedly signalled its intention to block decisions such as Ukraine's EU accession, using unanimity as a strategic veto instrument to protect national interests (Orbán, 2025c). Similarly, FdI uses its position both in Parliament and through the Italian government to resist legislative proposals. Carlo Fidanza, head of the FdI delegation in the EP, for example, praised Italy's successful resistance to certain EGD directives in the Council, framing it as a model for defending national sovereignty (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024g). It is important to note that such influence in the Council is only possible for parties in government and in policy areas that require unanimity.

In the EP, group formation remains another powerful channel through which right-wing populist parties seek to gain influence. While their current fragmentation in different political groups often prevents unified action, recent attempts to realign through new alliances, such as the formation of the PpE, show a growing awareness of the institutional benefits of group status, including increased access to speaking time, funding and committee roles (Becker & Von Ondarza, 2024, pp. 5-6). Especially Fidesz is actively working to build a new transnational platform through the PpE alliance, which Orbán presents as the foundation for a 'new majority' in European politics after the 2024 European elections. Although he currently remains the only head of government in this group, Orbán has expressed optimism about expanding the alliance (Orbán, 2024c). In the meantime, issue-based cooperation is growing. Although the current existing divisions, particularly on foreign policy and relations with Russia, limit full cooperation, shared priorities such as opposition to the EGD, a commitment to technological neutrality and nuclear energy and a pro-Trump stance provide opportunities for tactical alliances. Fidesz openly plans to form issue-based alliances with other nationalist actors, that prioritize national interests over fixed alliances. This flexible cooperation strategy allows the party to form ad hoc coalitions with like-minded parties like the AfD, for example, on issues like energy, as expressed by Orbán during a meeting with Alice Weidel in February 2025 (Orbán, 2025d). This strategic use of EP structures enables right-wing populist actors to shape debates, obstruct consensus or force concessions even though they do not have a numerical majority.

Looking ahead, right-wing populist parties seek to increase their influence in the EU not by exiting the Union, but by reshaping it from within. By fostering bilateral ties with ideologically aligned parties and advancing transnational initiatives, like the PfE, they seek to challenge the liberal mainstream and push the Union toward a more intergovernmental model. Their rhetoric and actions shape discourse, increase polarization and can indirectly influence political debates in the EU, especially when they hold national power, as seen in the case of Fidesz. These developments show that despite some ideological divisions, right-wing populist parties use both institutional rules and intergovernmental mechanisms strategically to influence EU integration and defend sovereignty at the EU level. Thus, while these parties may lack cohesive long-term strategies, they are far from irrelevant. Their influence on national governments enables them to exercise veto powers in key areas, while their strengthened role in the EP makes it more difficult to reach consensus, making coordinated integration efforts increasingly difficult.

Another emerging dynamic to consider is the potential rapprochement between right-wing populist actors and the EPP in the EP. Some recent signals, indicate a willingness of the EPP to seek common ground with FdI from ECR on specific issues. If such strategic alliances solidify, they could impact parliamentary dynamics, especially in committees and legislative negotiations. This raises concerns about the normalization and mainstreaming of Eurosceptic positions within core EU institutions. At the same time, the EP shows a selective cordon sanitaire: the ECR is being included in key roles, such as committee chairs, while groups like PfE and ESN remain excluded. Still, recent joint votes, such as a symbolic resolution on Venezuela supported by EPP, ECR, PfE and ESN, show that full right-wing majorities are becoming possible, which may influence future dynamics in the EU (Becker & Von Ondarza, 2024, pp. 6-7).

4.3.2 Scenarios for the future of European integration under right-wing populism

This chapter reflects on the empirical findings by linking them to theoretical frameworks of European integration and by outlining competing visions of the future of the EU in light of growing right-wing populist influence. Thereby it aims to answer the second research question regarding the implications of these parties' positions for the future of European integration in climate and security. First of all, the explanatory power of neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism is assessed in the light of the current right-wing populist challenges. It continues with a development of three possible scenarios, to illustrate how the role of right-wing populist parties could shape the future of EU climate and security policy, followed by a comparison with existing integration scenarios outlined by the European Commission.

From a neo-functionalist perspective, which assumes that integration progresses from one sector to another through spillover effects, right-wing populist resistance represents a significant counterforce. By politicising areas such as climate and fiscal solidarity, they seek to disrupt, block or even reverse these spillovers mechanisms that would deepen integration. If they succeed, especially if there is institutional gridlock, the neo-functionalists' predictions are directly challenged. In contrast, liberal intergovernmentalism offers a more appropriate and realistic view to understand the current dynamics. Liberal intergovernmentalism assumes that national governments are the main drivers of integration and that they only seek cooperation if it is in line with national preferences. Right-wing populist parties reinforce this logic by emphasising the primacy of national sovereignty and calling for selective, transactional cooperation.

These theoretical foundations provide the analytical lens through which the implications of right-wing populism on the future of the EU can be explored. While deeper integration along supranational lines remains a theoretical possibility, it appears increasingly unlikely in light of current political developments, since it is the least compatible with the analysed party positions. Instead, the scenarios will focus on three more plausible developments that are located within the intergovernmental framework:

Scenario 1: Uncoordinated blockage and fragmentation: In this first scenario, the right-wing populist parties continue to gain influence at both the national and EU levels but remain largely uncoordinated and fragmented at EU level. Despite their ideological commonalities, persistent disagreements on foreign policy, for example, regarding relations with Russia, and a lack of unified parliamentary direction limit comprehensive cooperation and action. However, they are becoming more and more capable of obstructing legislation through institutional means, especially the Council's unanimity. In areas like climate policy, this means that EU-wide initiatives such as the EGD or 'Fit for 55' are stagnating or being watered down, as national opt-outs and exemptions become increasingly common. The same logic applies to security policy: key decisions on defence cooperation are slowed down or prevented, which strengthens intergovernmental coordination over supranational coordination. The EU's funding mechanisms are increasingly controversial and right-wing populist governments are calling for stricter conditionality or national control. There is no common plan, but many vetoes, blockades and national exceptions that prevent a coherent EU policy. This scenario leads to a fragmented EU that finds it difficult to act collectively in strategic areas, even though no formal transfer of competences occurs.

Scenario 2: Selective reform and strategic adaptation: This scenario assumes a more pragmatic approach especially by governing right-wing populist parties like Fidesz and FdI. Although they continue to reject centralisation and oppose certain EU policies, they strategically use their institutional roles, like their positions in the Council and EP, to reshape legislation in line with national interests instead of blocking it altogether. This approach creates pressure for selective reforms: Climate policy is being shifted towards economic competitiveness and national flexibility, while technology neutrality and nuclear energy are gaining in importance. Security policy cooperation is permitted, but only if it serves national interests, such as border protection or the autonomy of the defence industry. In this scenario, the EU institutions adapt to national sensitivities and a greater diversity of approaches, especially in financial policy. This does not lead to disintegration, but to a more flexible and fragmented Union. The result is a more intergovernmental EU where cooperation and integration only continues selectively, especially in areas with economic or security benefits. This means that instead of preventing a common European line (as in scenario 1) or fundamentally restructuring the EU (as in scenario 3), they are committed to making the EU more flexible, economically oriented and nationally controlled in certain areas. The EU avoids major setbacks but also slows down its ambitions.

Scenario 3: Coordinated formation of a right-wing populist bloc: In this scenario, right-wing populist parties intensify their coordination at the European level in the future and form a unified bloc, such as through new alliances and realignment in the EP or strengthened political groups like the PöE. Under shared leadership, for instance by Hungary, this bloc works systematically to challenge further integration and weaken supranational institutions. They agree on common priorities like rejecting economically damaging climate regulation, opposing further integration of EU level missions and calling for greater national control over EU funds. This bloc becomes influential enough to influence budget negotiations, obstruct legislation and reshape debates in the EP. This scenario does not imply withdrawal from the EU, but a redefinition of integration based on a confederation of sovereign states pushing for a treaty revision or institutional reforms. The EU does not dissolve, but becomes unable to act, since it is increasingly hollowed out from within with a consciously call for a transformation of the EU towards more intergovernmentalism. This means, while it continues to exist formally, coordinated right-wing populist forces systematically reduce its capacity for action and redefine it as a loose framework of sovereign states, leading to a loss of political relevance.

In all three scenarios, an exit of the EU is not desired, since continued access to the single market is considered economically beneficial and a strategic priority. The worst-case scenario of total disintegration and the dissolution of the EU is therefore unlikely, as it does not align

with the strategic interests of right-wing populist parties. While open opposition to the EU has become less important after Brexit, the prevailing trend is the one of a transformative opposition: the aim is not to leave the EU, but to reshape it. Among the outlined scenarios, scenario 2 appears therefore most likely, while scenario 3 remains the least probable due to existing ideological divisions. When these three scenarios are compared with the five official scenarios for the future of the EU outlined by the European Commission in its 2017 White Paper - (1) carrying on, (2) nothing but the single market, (3) those who want more do more, (4) doing less more efficiently and (5) doing much more together - it becomes clear that the scenario most compatible with the rise of right-wing populism is 'nothing but the single market'. This outcome reflects a minimalist vision of the EU that retains economic integration while avoiding political deepening (European Commission, 2017). While 'carrying on' is becoming increasingly unlikely in light of current political developments, deeper supranationalism ('doing much more together') is totally incompatible with the ideological positions of the analysed parties. Thus, within the spectrum defined by liberal intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism, the likely trajectory for the EU under increasing right-wing populist influence is one of reduced supranational ambition and a resurgence of national sovereignty.

Overall, for the areas of climate and security, it has become clear that right-wing populist parties represent their vision of transforming the EU into a looser framework of national cooperation on an interest-driven basis, in which integration is conditional, selective and limited by sovereignty. Their persistent calls for renationalizing key competences align closely with an intergovernmental logic that weakens the supranational character of the EU and aligns with their core vision, that converges around a Europe of sovereign nations. Which scenario for European integration will dominate in the future depends heavily on whether it is possible to integrate these parties institutionally or whether they dominate as a destructive force. Given their growing presence in both national and EU institutions, it can be assumed that they will continue to be influential players in shaping the integration process in the coming years.

5. Conclusion

Over the past decades, European integration has increasingly relied on consensus, solidarity, and a shared vision of progress across borders. However, in recent years, right-wing populism has gained electoral and institutional strength across the EU, challenging established integration processes and long-standing assumptions about the direction and durability of the European project and is reshaping the political landscape of the EU. This became particularly visible in the 2024 European elections, which saw an historic high number of right-wing populist MEPs

enter the EP. Especially, climate and security policy have emerged as issues of growing significance and contention within the EU. Political debates that were previously dominated by mainstream parties are now influenced by right-wing populist actors, who criticize not only the specific policies, but also the way decisions are made at the European level. This thesis examined whether and how the selected right-wing populist parties FdI, Fidesz and AfD adopt converging or diverging positions on European integration in the fields of climate and security, especially since there are divided into different political groups in the EP after the European elections 2024. The methodological approach, which was a qualitative content analysis of party manifestos, statements, documented interviews and speeches as well as secondary sources, allowed for a contextualised and comparative examination of each party's stance.

The analysis demonstrated that FdI, Fidesz, and the AfD share a broadly critical stance towards European integration, particularly in the fields of climate and security policy. While not identical in rhetoric or strategy, all three parties converge ideologically in their rejection of deeper supranational governance and in their calls for a rebalancing of competences in favour of national sovereignty. This opposition extends to EU funding and financial mechanisms, especially those underpinning climate and security initiatives, which they frame as illegitimately centralised or misaligned with national interests. In climate policy, they advocate for limiting supranational regulation in favour of flexible national pathways. The AfD pursues a strictly climate-sceptical stance, questions the scientific consensus and rejects almost all EU-level environmental initiatives. Fidesz, in contrast, adopts a more pragmatic approach, accepting the principle of climate action but resisting supranational control or binding funding obligations. FdI supports certain green transition goals while pushing for a greater say for member states. Similarly, in security, their criticism entails the rejection of a common EU defence policy in favour of ad hoc cooperation that respects national autonomy, but diverge in attitudes toward Russia and Ukraine or NATO alignment, since FdI strongly supports NATO and transatlantic ties, Fidesz maintains an ambiguous stance but leans clearly toward closer ties with Russia and China, while AfD questions NATO, Ukraine support and advocates for a more Russia-friendly approach.

The findings of this thesis contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary right-wing populist parties position themselves within the EU's political and institutional landscape following the 2024 European elections. While Fidesz, FdI and AfD differ in their strategies and rhetoric, they share a core vision of Europe as a union of sovereign nations that cooperate selectively and pragmatically. The combination of strategic intergovernmental veto power and growing parliamentary organization signals, that right-wing populist parties are learning to navigate and leverage EU structures more effectively, not to advance integration, but to reshape

it on their own terms. The findings thereby also provide an answer to the second research question, by suggesting that the future of European integration will be significantly shaped by the ability or failure of these parties to institutionalize their vision. If parties remain divided but strong, they may block key decisions and weaken common action. If they act more strategically, they could push for reforms that suit national interests, leading to a more flexible but fragmented EU. And finally, if they manage to build a stable alliance, they might reshape integration altogether, reducing supranational power while keeping economic benefits like the single market. Taken together, the analysed parties illustrate the complexity within the European right and the varied implications their policies could have for the future of European integration, particularly as climate change and global security challenges continue to demand coordinated responses at the EU level. The results of this research therefore build on existing theories of European integration, by expanding it to include the perspective of right-wing populism and reinforce the plausibility of the ‘nothing but the single market’ scenario for the future of European integration as the most compatible with right-wing populist preferences.

From a practical perspective, the analysis offers insights that are valuable for EU policymakers, national governments and pro-European parties. Understanding the ideological positions and strategic goals of right-wing populists can help anticipate institutional conflicts, policy blockades and discursive shifts within the EU and thereby support the development of more targeted responses, whether in the form of coalition-building, institutional reform or communication strategies. In addition, the findings have clear economic implications. Many of the policy areas where right-wing populist parties seek to assert national control, such as climate and energy policy, environmental regulation and industrial strategy, are central to the EU’s long-term economic functioning and competitiveness. A better understanding of right-wing populist agendas, like their resistance to supranational policies, can help policymakers avoid destabilizing market signals, reduce regulatory uncertainty and design EU frameworks that are more resilient to political contestation. Ultimately, political stability and economic predictability are closely linked and managing the right-wing populist challenge is key to safeguard both.

While this paper provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged, which may serve as points of reference for future research. Firstly, the generalisability of the results is limited, because the study is based on three cases and thus does not reflect the full range of right-wing populist parties in the EU, especially considering the diversity of party systems, political cultures and electoral dynamics across EU member states. Further research could therefore focus on including more different EU member states and right-wing parties, particularly by expanding the analysis to additional members of the right-wing political groups in the

EP, to reflect the full diversity within the EU. This would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of whether the patterns identified in this thesis also apply to other parties and national contexts and help to draw more general conclusions. In addition, the analysis is mainly based on party programmes, official statements and documented interviews and speeches. These sources show how the parties present themselves, but they might differ from their actual behaviour in practice, especially if they are in government or if political conditions change. Therefore, future studies could increase validity by looking at how party positions translate into legislative behaviour across institutions, for instance. Another focus could also be to investigate the impact of governing responsibility on EU positions. Moreover, given the short time frame since the 2024 European elections, this study cannot account for long-term political developments or potential strategic shifts that may emerge over time. Due to the dynamic nature of the political landscape, it is possible that future developments or party strategies may diverge from the conclusions drawn in this thesis. Especially a longitudinal perspective would be valuable to examine how the parties' positions develop over time, as the political landscape evolves.

Looking ahead, it is equally important to take a closer look at how mainstream parties respond to this shift. Future research could therefore build on the results of this study by analysing the role of the EPP in more detail. The increasing possibility of cooperation between parts of the EPP and right-wing populist actors as well as the convergence of conservative parties with right-wing populist positions are an important factor in the growing influence of these tendencies but were not dealt with in depth in this study. Finally, it could be insightful to include parties that are not formally part of the right-wing populist spectrum, but show similar rhetorical and strategic tendencies, such as SMER (Direction – Social Democracy) in Slovakia. Although often categorized as part of the left, SMER under Robert Fico displays characteristics that closely resemble right-wing populist parties in both tone and agenda (Zvada, 2023). Assessing the changing dynamics of European party politics may be improved by a more comprehensive study that takes these new players into account, since a deeper understanding of these developments will be essential for evaluating the future direction of European integration.

Overall, this thesis has demonstrated that although right-wing populist parties are becoming increasingly present throughout the EU, any oversimplified idea of a united front is challenged by their current internal variety. It remains to be seen if this fragmentation reduces their political influence or only changes the methods in which they affect integration. There is no doubt that the political environment in the EU is shifting and that it is imperative, not optional to comprehend the role of right-wing populist forces in the future.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Coding guideline

Category: Climate			
Definition: This category includes all text passages that refer to climate policy, environmental or energy-related issues, especially in connection with EU policy. This includes statements on climate targets, regulatory measures, technological strategies, financing mechanisms and the broader political framing of the green transition in the EU context. Coding rule: Code all content that refers directly or indirectly to climate, energy or environmental policy topics, including EU funding related to green objectives. Typical subtopics / keywords: - Climate change, climate protection, climate and CO₂ reduction targets - Energy transition, renewable energies, fossil fuels, energy prices and infrastructure - Environmental pollution, biodiversity, nature conservation - Sustainability, circular economy, recycling - Agriculture (if ecologically relevant), land use - Green technologies and EU-climate related funding instruments - Buildings, housing and transport with environmental relevance (e.g. heating systems or electric vehicles)			
Subcategory	Definition	Examples	Coding rule
Climate policy and climate change	Covers positions and narratives on the existence, causes, or consequences of climate change and EU political strategies to mitigate or adapt to it. Focuses especially on emissions targets, CO ₂ reduction, and climate legislation set by the EU (f.e. EGD and 'Fit for 55'), including criticism of economic or social impact of these initiatives	"The Green Deal is effectively the EU's suicide attempt." (Orbán, 2025a) "The eco-madness of the Green Deal written by the European left condemns us to an 'unfortunate step backwards'" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5) "Climate change has always existed. It is a complex phenomenon caused by a variety of factors. The question of man's contribution to this is scientifically unresolved." (AfD, 2025, p. 77) "The 'Fit for 55' package is a dystopia of an eco-socialist Brussels liability and redistribution state [...]." (AfD, 2023, p. 40)	Code when party explicitly refers to: - climate change as a phenomenon (real or denied), - political measures taken in response to it (e.g. EGD, 'Fit for 55', CO₂ reduction goals), - broadier critiques or support of climate protection policy.
Energy policy	Covers all statements regarding energy supply strategies, specific energy sources (fossil fuels, nuclear, renewables like wind energy), and the EU's role in shaping national energy policy. Includes both support for or opposition to the energy transition, as well as calls for sovereignty, affordability and diversification in the energy sector	"Our strategy for ensuring energy security is based on two pillars: diversification of suppliers and differentiation of energy sources." (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 13) "Fossil fuels were and are the basis of our prosperity." (AfD, 2023, p. 40). "So we need a new energy policy in Europe, otherwise our companies will go bankrupt." (Orbán, 2024c)	Code when the party discusses: - energy sources (coal, gas, nuclear, renewables) - the reliability, affordability, or sovereignty of energy supply strategies - EU frameworks such as the energy transition, energy sanctions, price caps, or infrastructure plans (e.g. RePowerEU) - direct links between energy strategy and national prosperity, sovereignty or competitiveness. General climate change debates and environmental framing (e.g. animals dying from wind turbines) are excluded

Subcategory	Definition	Examples	Coding rule
Green technologies and innovation	Covers party positions on technological innovations and investments aimed at achieving environmental or climate-related goals. This includes support for or rejection of technologies such as hydrogen, batteries, energy storage, fusion, and electromobility	• "There are currently efforts in the EU to strengthen centrally controlled investment management for ideological reasons within the framework of the so-called taxonomy, e.g. in the case of so-called 'green technologies.'" (AfD, 2023, p. 24) • "Decoupling green investments from the deficit ratio." (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5)	• Only code if technology or innovation aspects are at the centre - e.g. statements on strategic investments, research, industrial competitiveness in the context of environmental goals. • Do not code if technologies are only mentioned as part of broader energy, transport or environmental policies without focus on innovation
Transportation and mobility sector	Covers party positions on transport infrastructure and regulation (f.e. road, aviation, automotive) when linked to environmental or climate goals of the EU. This includes positions on emission limits, driving bans, phase-out of combustion engines, or preferential treatment of electric vehicles	• "In the transport sector, the AfD will campaign at all levels to lift the ban on the combustion engine." (AfD, 2025, p. 41) • "Global air traffic is of fundamental importance for Germany and Europe - and must not be sacrificed to short-sighted, unscientific climate hysteria." (AfD, 2023, p. 34)	• Text passage must refer to mobility or transport in connection with climate or environmental policy • Code if EU transport targets and regulations (e.g. phase-out of combustion engines, emission reduction, subsidies for e-cars) are discussed
Circular economy	Relates to text passages on resource efficiency, recycling and closed-loop systems (f.e. circular economies) aimed at long-term environmental and economic sustainability	• "Define and implement a national strategic plan for the circular economy that reduces the consumption of natural resources, increases the quality and quantity of recycling, reduces landfill and converts waste into renewable energy through the construction of innovative and sustainable facilities." (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022, p. 12)	• Code when sustainability strategies, circular economy approaches or resource conservation is promoted or criticized
Building sector	Includes opinions on EU regulations related to buildings and housing. It focuses particularly on measures concerning energy efficiency in housing, renovation obligations or heating system restrictions	• "There can be no EU regulation that fits all buildings from Finland to Portugal." (AfD, 2023, p. 34) • "The planned ban on oil and gas heating systems is a serious interference with citizens' property and fundamental rights, which the AfD is fighting politically." (AfD, 2023, p. 40)	• Code when buildings, housing, or construction are discussed in connection with climate or energy regulation. • Include references to renovation mandates, heating system bans, energy efficiency rules, or solar panel requirements
Agricultural policy	Addresses party positions on agriculture in relation to environmental, climate or sustainability goals at EU level, including references to the CAP and land-use conflicts involving renewables. Focus is also placed on how these policies affect farmers, rural livelihoods and traditional agricultural practices	• "Appropriate and performance-based remuneration for farmers must be ensured for all generations. This can only happen with more independence and without EU regulation mania. For this reason, we also reject the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)." (AfD, 2025, p. 73) • "Farmers were seen as a 'problem', in reality they are a valuable resource in the fight against the climate crisis." (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 4)	• Code when climate-related regulations and EU environmental frameworks are discussed in the context of agriculture, including references to CAP, rural sustainability and land-use conflicts • Code when the impact of climate/ environmental policy on farmers' livelihoods and autonomy is emphasized

Subcategory	Definition	Examples	Coding rule
Environmental conservation	Focuses on statements about the protection of nature, wildlife, biodiversity, landscapes, ecosystems and critique of environmental degradation caused by EU-led policies – often related to the expansion of renewables like wind/ solar parks	• "No other form of energy takes such a heavy toll on wildlife as the wind power industry." (AfD, 2025, p. 80) • "Protection of territory, landscape and nature threatened by neglect and abandonment [...]" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 4)	• Code when the main argument focuses on the protection of nature, biodiversity, or ecosystems, even if the issue concerns renewable energy or climate measures (e.g. criticism of wind power due to its impact on wildlife or landscapes)
EU spending and funding mechanisms in climate	Covers party positions on the use, allocation, or governance of EU financial instruments in relation to climate policy, incl. critiques or proposals concerning funds such as the EGD budget or NextGenerationEU	• "Thanks to the continued proclamation of so-called crises, such as the climate, financial, migration, corona and gas crises, Brussels is able to demand financial packages of unprecedented size [...]" (AfD, 2023, p. 41) • "Funding from the EU budget for measures to enhance and safeguard the area, for an effective policy to prevent environmental disasters." (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024d, p. 5)	• Code only when EU funding is explicitly discussed in connection to climate, green transition, or environmental objectives, not in general economic contexts

Category: Security				
Definition: This category covers party positions on international relations, security and defence policy, military aspects, and foreign relations. It includes positions on global conflicts, alliances (e.g. NATO), armament, defence and geopolitical strategies. Content in this category typically reflects how parties interpret external threats, the role of national and European armed forces, or the EU's position in global power dynamics. Coding rule: Code all statements that deal with security, defence, or foreign policy beyond domestic issues. Include content referring to alliances, military spending, international crises, and geopolitical positioning, especially where the EU plays a role. Typical subtopics / keywords: - International conflicts, war, crisis diplomacy - NATO, UN, EU foreign policy, alliances - Foreign trade and sanctions (if geopolitically relevant) - Peacekeeping, arms exports, defence budgets - Military cooperation, armed forces, defence policy - Geopolitical strategies				
Subcategory	Definition	Examples	Coding rule	
Defence and military	Covers security and defence policy topics such as NATO, defence strategies, armed forces, arms policy, and military cooperation	„Instead of a European imperial army, we need an independent Hungarian army, over which only we have control“ (Orbán, 2024b) „The AfD rejects a European army and maintains a fully capable Bundeswehr as the cornerstone of German sovereignty.“ (AfD, 2023, p. 30)	Code when parties discuss military policy in a European context, including defence spending, EU strategic autonomy, NATO alignment, or arms procurement and cooperation	
International relations and foreign policy	Covers bilateral or multilateral foreign policy positions towards global actors (e.g., USA, China, Africa) outside of the Ukraine conflict, focusing on diplomacy, strategic interests trade, sanctions, development or geopolitical influence	„China is an extremely important trading partner for Germany, both as a competitor and a partner.“ (AfD, 2025, p. 93) „Greater consideration of the Italian communities abroad, protection of Italian identity in the world also as a valuable instrument for facilitating diplomatic, economic and trade relations with other states.“ (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, p. 1)	Code when the text discusses external relations or security strategies toward third countries (non-Russia/Ukraine), particularly within an EU or strategic cooperation context	
Ukraine war and Russia relations	Refers to the war in Ukraine, the EU's political, economic and military responses, and broader party positioning on relations with Russia. It also includes positions on Ukraine's potential accession to the EU or NATO.	„The Western strategy aimed at breaking Russia has failed. No one dares to admit it, but we have lost this war.“ (Orbán, 2025f) „Restoring uninterrupted trade with Russia includes the immediate lifting of economic sanctions against Russia and the repair of the Nord Stream pipelines.“ (AfD, 2025, p. 91-92) „Ukraine is fighting for its freedom - and for ours too.“ (Fratelli d'Italia, 2025f)	Code when the content addresses Russia's invasion of Ukraine, EU sanctions, arms support, calls for neutrality or peace, or views on Russia as a strategic partner or threat	
EU spending and funding mechanisms in security	Covers views on EU-level defence and security-related financial instruments (e.g., European Defence Fund, Ukraine aid, budget reallocation), and the use of common resources for strategic autonomy	„The first is that if the Ukrainians came into the EU, then Ukraine would have to be rebuilt with EU money. That would be a huge cost.“ (Orbán, 2025c)	Code when parties comment on EU security spending, burden-sharing, military aid funding (e.g. to Ukraine), or call for national control over security-related budgets within EU frameworks	

Appendix B: Summary

The rise of right-wing populist parties represents one of the most significant political shifts within the EU, particularly in the context of the 2024 European elections. Their electoral success in the 2024 European elections and the subsequent regrouping into three distinct political groups in the EP (ECR, PEF and ESN) raise pressing questions about their actual coherence on European integration. Consequently, this thesis investigates how the three prominent right-wing populist parties FdI, Fidesz and AfD position themselves on European integration in the politically sensitive and cooperation-intensive areas of climate and security policy. The central research questions ask whether these parties adopt similar or divergent positions across these policy fields and what implications these positions may hold for the future of European integration. The analysis is guided by a dual theoretical framework in which populism theory provides the ideological lens through which the parties' positions are examined, while theories of European integration, especially liberal intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism, offer a structural perspective to evaluate their impact on the EU. Methodologically, the thesis is based on a qualitative comparative case study of the three parties, using party manifestos, position statements, documented speeches and interviews as well as research reports.

The findings reveal a strong ideological convergence among the three parties in their opposition to deeper supranational governance. Across both climate and security policy, all three parties advocate a return of competences to the national level. In climate policy, they reject the centralized implementation of the EGD as economically damaging, ideologically driven and disconnected from national realities and instead advocate for nationally tailored, economically pragmatic strategies. While FdI and Fidesz acknowledge climate change and support more flexible approaches that secure industrial competitiveness, the AfD takes a much more radical stance, because it questions the scientific consensus and rejects almost all EU environmental initiatives. In the field of security, the parties similarly reject the idea of a supranational EU defence policy and advocate for intergovernmental ad-hoc cooperation. All three emphasize the importance of national autonomy, yet they diverge significantly in foreign policy orientation. Fidesz pursues a dual strategy aimed at balancing relations between East and West, whereas the AfD promotes a more isolationist, Russia-friendly approach. Both parties express scepticism toward sanctions against Russia and military aid to Ukraine and call for the restoration of energy ties with Russia. FdI, by contrast, positions itself more diplomatically, aligning with transatlantic partners and NATO, firmly condemns Russian aggression and supports aid to Ukraine, yet continues to insist on prioritizing national interests within EU-level coordination. Notably, all three parties express a favourable stance toward Donald Trump and the U.S. conservative camp.

In terms of EU funding mechanisms, all three parties criticise the EU's central financial instruments and demand more national control over them, even though their countries often benefit from EU subsidies. This reflects a broader ideological focus on economic nationalism and institutional scepticism, despite the differences in tone and political strategy.

The analysis shows that while there is no complete unity, there is considerable ideological convergence on key issues across national and group boundaries. These differences often reflect strategic considerations, particularly with regard to whether a party is in government or in opposition. Fidesz and FdI, which are both in power, take more pragmatic and moderate positions than the opposition-oriented AfD. Together, the parties share the vision of a 'Europe of sovereign nations' that cooperate on a selective, interest-based basis. Despite this agreement in rejecting supranationalism, however, the parties do not intend to leave the EU but rather seek to change it from within by expanding their power in the EP, forming transnational coalitions (like the PFE) and increasing their ability to block or redirect legislative measures. Based on these findings, this thesis outlines three future scenarios for European integration under growing right-wing populism: (1) Blockage and fragmentation, where uncoordinated populist actors increasingly obstruct EU policy-making, especially in climate and security; (2) Selective reform and strategic adaptation, where these parties pragmatically reshape EU policies to fit national interests without aiming for disintegration; and (3) Formation of a right-wing populist bloc, where a coordinated alliance pushes for treaty changes to redefine the EU along intergovernmental lines.

These findings offer both theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, they show how right-wing populism challenges key assumptions of neofunctionalism, such as spillover-effects, while confirming liberal intergovernmentalism as a more suitable framework for explaining the sovereignty-driven logic of right-wing populist actors. Practically, understanding the positioning and strategies of right-wing populist parties is essential for policymakers and EU institutions seeking to understand and respond to the challenges in the evolving political landscape of the EU.

Appendix C: Zusammenfassung

Der Aufstieg rechtspopulistischer Parteien stellt eine der bedeutendsten politischen Verschiebungen innerhalb der EU dar, insbesondere im Kontext der Europawahlen 2024. Ihr Wahlerfolg und die anschließende Neugruppierung in drei eigenständige politische Fraktionen im Europäischen Parlament (EKR, PfE und ESN) werfen zentrale Fragen nach ihrer inhaltlichen Geschlossenheit in Bezug auf die europäische Integration auf. Infolgedessen untersucht diese Arbeit, wie sich drei prominente rechtspopulistische Parteien - FdI, Fidesz und die AfD - zur europäischen Integration positionieren in politisch sensiblen und kooperationsintensiven Bereichen der Klima- und Sicherheitspolitik. Die zentralen Forschungsfragen betreffen einerseits mögliche Übereinstimmungen oder Unterschiede in den inhaltlichen Positionen und andererseits die daraus resultierenden Implikationen für die Zukunft der europäischen Integration. Die Analyse stützt sich auf zwei theoretische Perspektiven: Populismustheorien dienen als ideologische Linse zur Einordnung der Parteipositionen, während Integrationsansätze, insbesondere der liberale Intergouvernementalismus und der Neofunktionalismus, eine strukturelle Bewertung ihrer Auswirkungen auf die EU ermöglichen. Grundlage der empirischen Untersuchung ist eine qualitative vergleichende Fallstudie, die auf Parteiprogrammen, parteiischen Stellungnahmen, dokumentierten Reden und Interviews sowie Forschungsberichten beruht.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine deutliche ideologische Konvergenz in der Ablehnung vertiefter supranationalen Entscheidungsstrukturen, denn in beiden Politikfeldern fordern alle drei Parteien eine Rückverlagerung zentraler Zuständigkeiten auf die nationale Ebene. In der Klimapolitik lehnen sie die zentralisierte Umsetzung des europäischen Green Deals als wirtschaftlich schädlich, ideologisch motiviert und realitätsfern ab und fordern stattdessen national ausgerichtete, wirtschaftlich pragmatische Strategien. Während FdI und Fidesz den Klimawandel grundsätzlich anerkennen und flexible nationale Ansätze unterstützen, die die Wettbewerbsfähigkeit der Industrie sichern, vertritt die AfD eine deutlich radikalere Position, da sie den wissenschaftlichen Konsens in Frage stellt und fast alle EU-Umweltinitiativen ablehnt. Auch im Bereich der Sicherheitspolitik lehnen die drei Parteien eine supranationale EU-Verteidigungspolitik ab und plädieren für zwischenstaatliche, ad-hoc-Kooperationen. Obwohl sie die Relevanz nationaler Souveränität hervorheben, weisen sie Unterschiede in ihrer außenpolitischen Ausrichtung auf. Fidesz verfolgt eine Doppelstrategie, die auf ein ausgewogenes Verhältnis zwischen Ost und West abzielt, während die AfD eine eher isolationistische, russlandfreundliche Haltung einnimmt. Beide Parteien stehen den Sanktionen gegen Russland und der Militärhilfe für die Ukraine skeptisch gegenüber und fordern die Wiederherstellung der Energiebeziehungen zu Russland. Die FdI hingegen positioniert sich eher diplomatisch, indem sie mit den transatlantischen

Partnern und der NATO kooperiert, die russische Aggression entschieden verurteilt und die Hilfe für die Ukraine unterstützt, aber weiterhin auf nationaler Entscheidungsfreiheit innerhalb der EU-Koordinierung besteht. Auffallend ist, dass alle drei Parteien eine positive Haltung gegenüber Donald Trump und dem konservativen Lager in den USA einnehmen. Auch in Bezug auf EU-Finanzierungsmechanismen kritisieren die drei Parteien zentrale Finanzinstrumente der EU und fordern eine stärkere nationale Kontrolle, obwohl ihre Länder oft erheblich von EU-Subventionen profitieren. Alle drei Parteien zeigen somit wirtschaftlichen Nationalismus und Misstrauen gegenüber EU-Institutionen, wenn auch unterschiedlich stark.

Aus der Analyse geht hervor, dass keine vollständige Einigkeit herrscht, aber eine ideologische Konvergenz in Schlüsselfragen über nationale und Fraktionsgrenzen hinweg besteht. Diese Unterschiede spiegeln häufig strategische Überlegungen wider, vor allem in Bezug darauf, ob eine Partei in der Regierung oder in der Opposition ist. Fidesz und FdI, die beide an der Macht sind, vertreten pragmatischere und gemäßigtere Positionen als die oppositionell orientierte AfD. Gemeinsam teilen die Parteien die Vision eines ‚Europas der souveränen Nationen‘, die auf einer selektiven, interessenbasierten Grundlage zusammenarbeiten. Trotz dieser Übereinstimmung in der Ablehnung des Supranationalismus beabsichtigen die Parteien jedoch nicht, aus der EU auszutreten, sondern versuchen die EU von innen heraus zu verändern, indem sie ihre Macht im Europäischen Parlament ausbauen, transnationale Koalitionen (wie die Pfe) bilden und ihre Möglichkeiten zur Blockierung oder Umlenkung von Gesetzgebungsmaßnahmen erweitern. Auf Basis dieser Erkenntnisse werden in dieser Arbeit drei mögliche Zukunftsszenarien für die europäische Integration entwickelt: (1) Blockade und Fragmentierung, bei der unkoordinierte, rechtspopulistische Parteien zunehmend die EU-Politik blockieren, vor allem in den Bereichen Klima und Sicherheit; (2) Selektive Reform und strategische Anpassung, wobei diese Parteien die EU-Politik pragmatisch umgestalten, um sie an nationale Interessen anzupassen, ohne eine Desintegration anzustreben; und (3) Bildung eines rechtspopulistischen Blocks, bei dem ein koordiniertes Bündnis rechtspopulistischer Akteure auf Vertragsänderungen drängt, um die EU nach intergouvernementalen Prinzipien neu auszurichten.

Diese Ergebnisse liefern sowohl theoretische als auch praktische Erkenntnisse. Theoretisch zeigen sie, wie der Rechtspopulismus Annahmen des Neofunktionalismus, wie etwa Spillover-Effekte, in Frage stellt, während der liberale Intergouvernementalismus sich als geeigneterer Rahmen zur Erklärung ihrer souveränitätsbezogenen Logik erweist. Praktisch ist das Verständnis der Positionen und Strategien rechtspopulistischer Parteien für politische Entscheidungsträger:innen und EU-Institutionen von entscheidender Bedeutung, um die Herausforderungen in der sich entwickelnden politischen Landschaft der EU zu verstehen und darauf zu reagieren.