

Democratic backsliding has not (yet) united the populist radical right in the European Parliament

The European Union is currently facing the double challenge of the rise of radical right populism and the presence of democratic backsliding in several member states. Yet despite the overlap of actors engaged in both processes, Mihail Chiru and Natasha Wunsch show that democratic backsliding has not yet served as a [catalyst](#) for populist radical right cooperation inside the European Parliament. Instead, ideological divergences and institutional fragmentation still pose an obstacle to collaboration between populist radical right parties at the European level.

Recent years have seen a strengthening of populist radical right parties across Europe go hand in hand with the emergence of democratic backsliding. While there is ample evidence that [populism drives democratic backsliding](#), it is less clear whether democratic backsliding is inversely facilitating more cohesive mobilisation by populist radical right parties at the EU level.

Given the substantive overlap between the sets of actors engaged in both processes – with the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Hungary's Fidesz two cases in point – we claim that such a catalytic effect is at least plausible. In ideological terms, populist radical right parties' populism leads them to embrace an illiberal view of democracy and oppose the rule of law constraints to which the EU's mainstream forces appeal when attempting to address backsliding.

Moreover, their nativism and authoritarianism contribute to the rejection of any further deepening or widening of European integration, which they perceive as diluting national identities. Perpetrators of democratic backsliding have frequently adopted the same rhetoric. From a strategic perspective, populist radical right actors have an interest in fuelling confrontation between EU institutions and national governments to signal their opposition to supranationalism and weaken the prospects for further integration.

In a nutshell, we contend that increased collaboration to contest EU intervention on instances of democratic backsliding may serve as a springboard towards greater overall populist radical right cooperation, enabling these actors to overcome the ideological and institutional barriers that have hampered their more effective EU-level mobilisation to date.

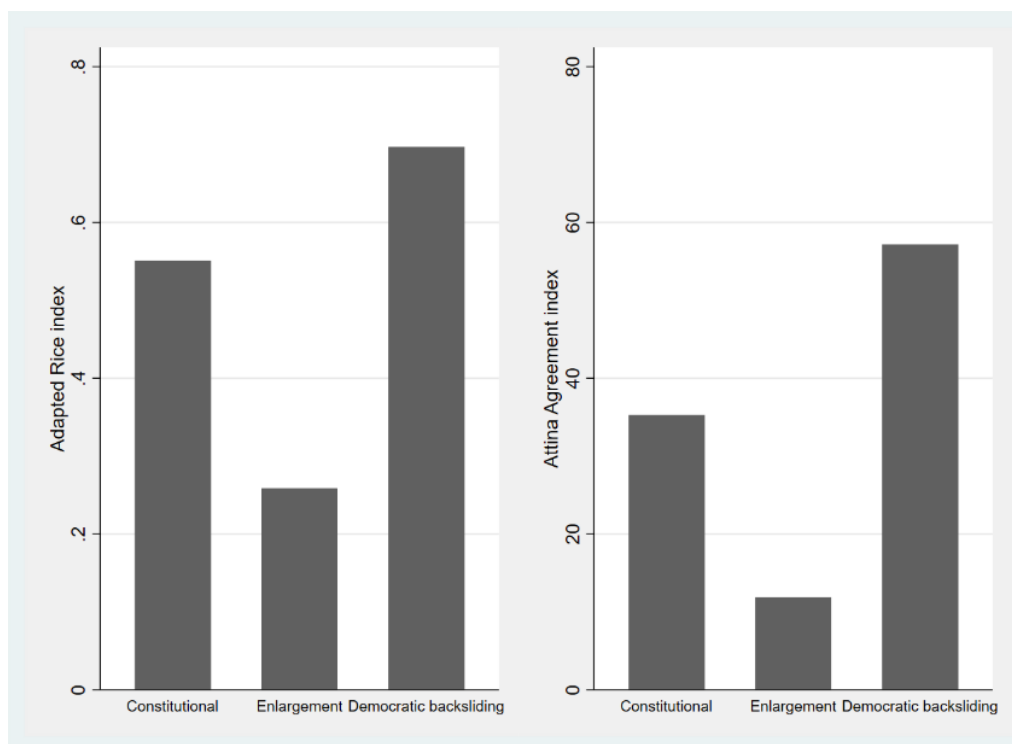
Limited agenda-setting and vote cohesion

To probe whether democratic backsliding has served to federate populist radical right voices inside the European Parliament, we examine their cooperation on matters directly related to democratic and rule of law violations as well as to broader polity-related issues comprising deepening (constitutional issues) and widening (enlargement) as the two central dimensions of European integration. This enables us to investigate whether the emergence of backsliding and joint populist radical right mobilisation against perceived EU interference in domestic affairs (i.e., *reactive* cooperation) may also create a context that facilitates *proactive* cooperation among populist radical right actors seeking to challenge European integration more broadly.

Empirically, we study populist radical right collaboration at two distinct levels. First, we analyse the co-sponsorship of parliamentary questions as a measure of agenda-setting efforts by populist radical right MEPs: what issues do they emphasise when co-sponsoring parliamentary questions? Second, we examine populist radical right MEPs' ability to coalesce around a common agenda at roll-call votes. Our analysis of patterns and contents of cooperation among populist radical right MEPs over the past decade (2009-2019) reveals only a very low degree of collaboration.

When it comes to agenda-setting, parliamentary questions co-sponsored by two populist radical right MEPs remain extremely rare and, with few exceptions, confined to MEPs sharing not only a European Party Group affiliation, but coming from the same national party. During the 8th term, MEPs from the French Front National/Rassemblement National (FN/RN) alone account for almost 60 per cent of the populist radical right dyads that co-sponsored at least one parliamentary question.

Figure 1: Vote cohesion levels for populist radical right MEPs by topic



Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the *Journal of European Public Policy*.

Similarly, roll-call vote cohesion remains low for votes on democratic backsliding and constitutional issues and very low for votes on enlargement (see Figure 1). The degree of dissent varies considerably between party groups and is dependent on the size of the populist radical right MEP cohort in each group. While we find great cohesion in the two groups dominated by populist radical right members (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy and Europe of Nations and Freedom), we record high levels of deviation from a joint populist agenda where populist radical right MEPs represent only a minority (European Conservatives and Reformists and the European People's Party).

Enduring obstacles to populist radical right cooperation

Our empirical findings allay fears that the emergence of backsliding trends inside the EU could facilitate more generalised populist radical right contestation of European integration. Instead, our analysis suggests that ideological divergences within the populist radical right camp and the institutional dispersal of MEPs across different party groups continue to hamper their formal collaboration. While ideological proximity enables some instances of co-sponsorship of parliamentary questions, the vast majority of questions co-authored by populist radical right MEPs does not cross national party, let alone European party group lines.

Substantively, the agenda setting efforts of populist radical right parties are spread broadly across multiple policy areas rather than signalling a common strategic agenda. When it comes to roll-call votes, we note greater cohesion among populist radical right MEPs on votes relating to democratic backsliding, but even here, their cohesion remains low. Overall, the fragmentation of populist radical right MEPs over several party groups thus appears not only to be a symptom of their internal divergences, but also acts as an enduring obstacle to their effective cooperation at the EU level.

Rather than observing any marked intensification of EU-level populist radical right cooperation against the backdrop of democratic backsliding, we thus see a much more gradual and partial development towards greater collaboration. This tends to focus on attempts to find sufficient common ground for institutionalised cooperation among populist radical right MEPs, as indicated by the joint manifesto of populist radical right parties in July 2021 contesting the creation of a ['European superstate.'](#)

Our study represents a first attempt to analyse the interactions between democratic backsliding and European integration not through the lens of EU responses to such trends, but rather in terms of the impact of democratic backsliding in member states upon EU-level processes and outcomes. As democracy and the rule of law come under pressure in more member states, and backsliding deepens, we can expect such trends to have an increasingly direct impact on the conduct and orientation of EU policymaking. Our findings therefore highlight the need for further research to address the impact of democratic backsliding on EU-level cooperation.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying article in the [Journal of European Public Policy](#)

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