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**The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR):
'Eurorealism' in the ninth European Parliament**

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Abstract

After the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) party grouping experienced a major change in its representation and leadership, with the wholesale departure of its core British Conservative MEPs as a consequence of Brexit. Not for the first time, the ECR was written off by some commentators as merely another transient 'Eurosceptic' faction, with even its new, post-2019 party president, Georgia Meloni, representing the historically fascist Brothers of Italy (FdI). So which ECR featured in the 2019-2024 parliamentary session - the natural heirs of the mainstream British Conservatives or a 'radical right' group with a now emphatically populist, nationalist tone? In this article, it is argued that the ninth session saw the ECR truly establish itself as an important and coherent parliamentary group in Strasbourg and Brussels, complete with staff and resources, ostensibly acting as a strong voice for *conservatism* in Europe. With large numbers of MEPs from Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party leading the grouping, there was also much continuity with ECR policies that were opposed to political 'ever closer union', in favour of the single market, and enthusiastic about the wider role of the United States (US) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in international relations.

Introduction - the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the ninth European Parliament, 2019 - 2024

The ninth 2019 - 2024 session of the European Parliament was certainly a momentous one for the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. In 2019, their core national delegation of British Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) dramatically left the Hemicycle post-Brexit (Britain exiting the European Union). By 2020, Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni, for many commentators a 'radical-right' politician, had become the party president against the backdrop of a rise in support for nationalist and populist parties across Europe (McDonnell and Werner 2020; Mudde 2019). It would be easy to characterise these developments as a straightforward ideological lurch rightwards on the part of the ECR and evidence will be presented in this article which would ostensibly back up that view. Nevertheless, the broader contention of this analysis would be that there also existed much continuity in the group in terms of both its member parties and its over-arching principles. Indeed, from 2019 to 2024, it is argued that the ECR truly established itself as an important and coherent parliamentary faction in Brussels and Strasbourg, acting as a strong voice for *conservatism* in Europe. With large numbers of MEPs from Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party leading the grouping, there was also much continuity with policies that were opposed to political 'ever closer union', in favour of the single market, and enthusiastic about the wider role of the United States (US) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in international relations.

Taken together, 'Eurorealism' was and is the ECR's preferred way of describing these political positions - part ideology, part marketing tactic, 'Eurorealist' thinking craves a European Union that does 'less better' (European Conservatives and Reformists 2024). No-one is completely sure of the origins of the term but only a small number of academics have taken it seriously - Szczerbiak (with a twin focus on Euroscepticism and Polish politics, 2010), Leruth (with a twin focus on Euroscepticism and Belgian politics, 2016) and the present author (with a focus on the ECR party as a whole and British politics in particular, 2016; 2020; 2023). Increasingly, Italian scholars like Baldini, Tronconi and Angelucci (2022), Bressenalli and de Candia (2023) and Massetti (2023) have also turned their attention to the European Conservatives given the recent rise of member party Brothers of Italy (Fdi) in elections. Eurorealism clearly overlaps with Euroscepticism, in

particular ‘soft’ Euroscepticism (see Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008) - however, it also has more substance to it, both in the sense that it can be seen as more positive than Euroscepticism and also in the way it has additional elements to it which exist separately from the European Union. There are three inter-related strands to Eurorealism that can be highlighted when considering the ECR’s organisation:

First, the European Conservatives and Reformists are strong in their support for the sovereignty of nation states but also broadly positive towards the European Union and European integration - this position is the most obvious variant of ‘soft’ Euroscepticism, and places the ECR somewhere in between the federalist supporters of ‘ever closer union’ and ‘hard’ Eurosceptic parties that wish the EU had never come into existence at all. Second, and following on from this, the ECR is a vocal advocate for free market economics and trade, and in this sense, can even be described as ‘pro-European’, desiring a purer and more complete EU single market than exists at present. Third, and again linked to what has already been outlined, ECR politicians are passionately pro-America, pro-Britain and pro-NATO (North Atlantic Trade Organisation) i.e. they support Atlanticism, and value deeply the relationship between the European Union and the United States.

These three elements add up to a policy approach towards European integration that is distinct in its make-up from other party family groupings in the European Parliament, including both the centrist European People’s Party (EPP) and the more overtly ‘radical right’¹ Identity and Democracy (ID) which functioned from 2019 to 2024. One shorthand which the ECR deploys to convey its ideas is that is in favour of ‘free countries, free markets and free people’ (European Conservatives and Reformists 2024). With its strong and pronounced emphasis on free nation states, Eurorealism also has overtones of realism in international relations theory (Mearsheimer 2001; Walt 2005) although the ECR deny that they had this in mind when coming up with the concept (Interview with senior ECR staffer, 2018, Brussels). Moreover, the ninth session of the EP also firmly

¹ To some extent, terms such as ‘radical right’, ‘hard right’ and ‘far right’ are synonyms and there is insufficient space to go into too much depth satisfactorily about each of their individual meanings. For consistency, this article will use ‘radical right’ to describe parties and politicians located ideologically beyond ‘centre-right’.

reinforced the long-term existence of the ECR as an established transnational party federation (TPF), and 'Euro-party', in Brussels and Strasbourg.

The European Conservatives and Reformists were set up in 2009 with strong support from the then leader of the British Conservatives, David Cameron. While he was broadly pro-European, Mr Cameron felt he had to make a Eurosceptic gesture to his party to secure the leadership nomination in 2005 (Shipman 2017). He calculated that removing his party from the centre-right European People's Party was a sufficiently symbolic act without too many negative political consequences. In fact, this type of counter-intuitive thinking eventually led directly to the ill-fated 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom which would eventually see the UK leave the EU altogether (see Merkel 2024). Nevertheless, from 2009 onwards, the ECR started to function as a new faction in the EP, forcing British MEPs to immediately start vocally putting forward the case that it was possible to be moderate and centre-right ideologically without being slavishly in favour of 'ever closer union' and a 'United States of Europe'. From 2009 to 2014, the ECR was the fifth largest group in the European Parliament, from 2014 to 2019, it was the third largest group, and from 2019 to 2024, the group was the sixth largest (see Table 1).

Table One around here

The relationship between political parties and legislatures is a fundamentally symbiotic one, especially in long-established democracies - parties often act both as the glue that helps parliaments and assemblies function and also as a bridge between voters and the wider institution. More widely, the study of political parties as organisations and institutions is well-established with scholars such as Van Biezen and Kopecký (2014), Mair (2013) and Rose (1980) providing detailed accounts of the durability, resilience and flexibility of long-established party families in Western Europe. In the European Parliament, transnational party federations fulfil these crucial roles, despite the unusual supranational composition of the EP. The study of 'Euro parties' (the wider party families that are not limited solely to the European Union) and TPFs is a well-established field of research within political science and European Politics (Costa and Van Hecke 2023; McElroy and Benoit 2007). Accurate accounts of what the groups stand for and how they relate to one another is important for wider European affairs and European Union studies. Moreover, the study of the European Conservatives also makes a worthwhile contribution to the wider study of *conservatism, and centre-right to radical right political parties*, as an ideology, and as a political movement in European politics and government.²

The ECR as a centre-right partner for the European People's Party (EPP)?

If to take at face value the official version of the European Conservatives and Reformists themselves, the ECR is a firmly *centre-right* political party grouping in the European Parliament (European Conservatives and Reformists 2024). ECR politicians act as enthusiastic advocates for mainstream activities such as free trade - one summary of the ECR's 'Eurorealism' is that the group warmly supports the European Union and European integration but wants the EU to do 'less better' so that it can function more effectively. Elements of this version of the ECR's ideological beliefs may be partly true while other aspects perhaps require scepticism on the part of analysts and commentators - when looking at the 2019-2024 session of the Parliament, we can see some evidence that

² This article builds on primary research conducted for a monograph focusing on the European and Conservatives and Reformists (Steven 2020), including interviews with leading figures in the ECR party group, a statistical analysis of electoral behaviour using the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), and archival work carried out at Churchill College, Cambridge.

supports this claim empirically. There are examples from the ninth EP session that suggests the ECR was in many ways closer to the European People's Party (EPP) than it was to Identity and Democracy (ID) if to think of an ideological spectrum from left to right.

Langsaether's 2023 book confirms the older typology set up by Von Beyme (1985) that argues that conservatism is a distinct ideology, separate from both Christian democracy and the radical right. Prior to Von Beyme's analysis, there was often a lack of clarity when it came to discussing Christian democracy in particular, with many political scientists regarding CD, with its traditional predilection for a small state that does not interfere with the spiritual business of the Church, as a form of conservatism. Mair (1998) has also written about party families in Europe extensively, and the blurred lines that can exist across party boundaries. Crucially, this long discussed theoretical distinction is one brought to life in a tangible way by the existence of the European Conservatives and Reformists since 2009. From this point onwards, the ECR has represented an attempt to locate their *Conservative* organisation alongside the *Christian Democratic* EPP.³

While precise theoretical definitions of conservatism in politics can sometimes prove elusive, it is widely acknowledged that conservatives tend to value the freedom of the individual over the state, and maintain a related respect for the freedom of long-established institutions and conventions (see Garnett 2018). Norton states that 'Conservatives have an instinctive set of beliefs' (2021: 2), highlighting effectively the conservative suspicion of radical ideas. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) is often considered the first attempt to set out the conservative predilection for conserving that which already exists, seeking to reform incrementally and only when necessary. More modern conservative thinkers like Oakeshott (1962) and Scruton (2014) also echoed these Burkean sentiments in their writings, emphasising what it means to be of a conservative 'disposition'.

³ The European centre-right in countries like France and Germany is much less hostile to the role of the state in politics than in the United States partly due to the history of the twentieth century and the legacy of the post-war period when huge government-coordinated investment was necessary to rebuild Western Europe via a 'social market'. More recently, Bale and Kaltwasser (2021) provide a useful overview of the centre-right in Western Europe, albeit with one chapter on the United Kingdom.

Towards the end of the eighth European Parliament in 2019, the leader of the EPP, Manfred Weber, a Bavarian MEP, attracted attention with comments about parliamentary business and trilogues in Brussels and Strasbourg. Mr Weber stated that he found the ECR much more straightforward and easier to deal with than the Greens, even though technically the latter were pro-EU and the former supposedly 'Eurosceptic'. Mr Weber went on to argue that both the EPP and ECR were right of centre ideologically and often in agreement on issues around trade, business, economics and the single market (Fortuna 2019). Towards the end of the ninth EP in 2024, Ursula Von Der Leyen, the European Commission President, made similar comments on behalf of the EPP, stating that they would work with any party that was 'pro-EU, pro-NATO and pro-Ukraine'. These comments were interpreted slightly more ambiguously - some felt Ms Von Der Leyen's criteria included the ECR whilst others felt they excluded them. However, later on the year, at the first Spitzenkandidaten debate, Ms Von Der Leyen actually explicitly spelled out that she would be happy to work with the ECR in the tenth session of the EP, albeit under certain conditions (Wax 2024).

During the 2019 to 2024 session, various figures from the ECR held senior positions in the European Parliament, a sign of being part of the EU establishment. Johan Van Overtfeldt, a New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) MEP and former Belgian finance minister, was chair of the Budget Committee, having previously served in the same position from 2014 to 2019. Meanwhile, Latvian MEP Roberts Zile and Italian MEP Antonella Sberna were elected Vice-Presidents of the Parliament. While the overall number of formal positions allocated to the ECR reflected the slightly reduced levels of representation which it enjoyed after the 2019 elections, they nevertheless show the ECR firmly inside the EU's political *cordon sanitaire* for party family groups that are not considered to be extremist. In the previous 2014 to 2019 session of the Parliament, N-VA MEP Anneleen Van Bossuyt had served as chair of the Parliament's Internal Market Committee while Polish Law and Justice MEP Anna Fotyga held the chair of the Parliament's Subcommittee on Security and Defence, an area of policy of particular interest to ECR MEPs from Central and Eastern European states as well as those from Sweden and Finland. In particular, Mr Van Overtfeldt has developed a reputation for being an assured operator in the world of Brussels politics, knowledgeable and experienced about finance and budgets (Abbott 2024).

Away from policy-making and committees, one of the most straightforwardly centre right and mainstream member parties of the ECR are the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS). They became the government in Prague in 2021 and stand as close to the British Conservatives in their ideology and policies as any ECR member party - mixing a Thatcherite affection for the free market with more traditional social values. Their biggest figure, the former president of the Czech Republic and professor of economics, Vaclav Klaus, is sometimes nicknamed 'Central Europe's Margaret Thatcher' (see Hanley 2007). Crucially, ODS figures have always been involved in the ECR from its development in the 2000s to the present day. The ECR's *spitzenkandidat* in 2019 was Jan Zahradil, a close political disciple of Klaus, who continues to be a leading figure in the wider ECR 'Euro-party' (Interview with author, Brussels, 2 March 2017). Ahead of the 2024 elections, leading figures in ODS cautioned against the ECR moving closer to controversial figures such as Victor Orban in Hungary, leader of Fidesz, in the tenth session of the EP (Zachová 2024).

In this section, it is clear that it is possible, up to a point, to present a version of the ECR based on evidence from the ninth session of the European Parliament that is palatable to those who believe in mainstream, centrist politics and consider themselves pro-European. We see Czech and Belgian MEPs from ODS and N-VA making the positive argument that the European single market ought to be liberalised and opened up even more widely, while Polish and Baltic MEPs focus actively on making sure that the EU's defence and security policy is as tight as possible, including within the new context of the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, figures from the EU itself praise the ECR as sensible and realistic actors who have to be respected and heard. However, as the next section will go on to outline, there is a different version of the ECR which can also be presented, once again based on evidence from the 2019-2024 session, which points to a group that is much more emphatically 'radical-right' and 'Eurosceptic'.

The ECR as a 'radical right' partner for the Identity and Democracy (ID) party group?

As the last section mentioned, it would perhaps be naïve to merely accept on face value what the ECR itself states is the best way to describe its ideological and policy positions. One central component of political science accounts of parties in democracies is the

capacity for accurately labeling and categorising different types of politicians in a systematic and methodical way (see Langsaether 2023). This next section will seek to replicate the approach of the first part of the article and outline the evidence available from the ninth European Parliament with regard to policy positions, ideology and public statements in order to try to label the ECR in the most appropriate way. This section will look at the much more critical accusation that the ECR is more correctly described as ‘radical right’ in its overall political positions. Far from being a ‘critical friend’ of the EU, is the ECR in fact a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’, pretending to be sensible and pragmatic about European integration when its overall aim is actually to destroy the Union for which ultimately it has zero affection?

For sure, many commentators, academic and non-academic alike, would find aspects of the evidence and arguments included in the previous section as fundamentally lacking credibility. Mudde (2019) takes the view that ‘radical-right is radical-right’ when it comes to identifying politicians and parties who are not part of the European liberal mainstream. Scholars such as Mudde has no interest in accommodating subtle nuances between parties that are, on the one hand, completely against immigration on the grounds of multi-culturalism and those who, on the other, feel that the movement of people across borders perhaps simply needs to be managed better. For Mudde, the ECR is merely the same type of vehicle as Identity and Democracy - Eurosceptic, radical-right and illiberal. Other political scientists who implicitly or explicitly endorse this view are McDonnell and Werner who imply that radical right parties have joined the European Conservatives in the past for entirely expedient reasons around prestige and to be associated with the British Conservative Party in the eyes of their own domestic voters (2020).

Clearly, there is evidence that can be used from 2019 to 2024 to back up the claim that the European Conservatives and Reformists are more kindred spirits with Identity and Democracy than with the European People’s Party. For example, in the ninth session, the ECR welcomed to its organisation the anti-immigration Vox party of Spain, as well as continuing to host both the Sweden Democrats (SD) and the Finns, PS (see Table 2).⁴ Even

⁴ The ninth session also, however, witnessed the departure of the Danish People’s Party (DF) to ID.

more prominently came the arrival, complete with numerous new MEPs, of the Brothers of Italy (Fdi), the new leading party of government in Rome led by Giorgia Meloni. The Fdi's fascist past has been well documented with its historic links to Benito Mussolini, and despite what the party says about these being firmly in the past, that legacy continues to follow its politicians, including Ms. Meloni (see Baldini et al 2022). If to weigh this up with the previous 2014-2019 session and the departure of the group's 'backbone', the British Conservatives, we can certainly detect an ideological shift to the right amongst the group's national delegations overall. In preparation for the 2024 elections, a leading radical-right figure in France, Eric Zemmour, also unhelpfully aligned his party (Reconquest, R!) to the ECR. In January 2024, the *Brussels Times* ran an article stating that the MEPs from the Belgian New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) no longer felt at home in the ECR after the departure of the British Conservatives and were considering leaving to join the EPP after the June elections, echoing similar concerns also expressed by the Czech Civic Democrats (10 January). The ECR also has a large number of member state parties with only one single MEP, and these parties are frequently to be found on the fringes of their own domestic political systems.

Table Two around here

From an EU perspective, significant doubts have persisted about cooperating normally with the ECR. When during the first Spitzenkandidaten debates in 2024, Ursula Von Der Leyen stated that she would consider working with the ECR if the circumstances were right, as was mentioned in the last section, this caused upset amongst Socialists and Greens opponents - for them, this was the equivalent of working with the radical right Identity and Democracy (Griera 2024). Clearly, both these groups had the most to lose politically if the EPP were indeed to choose to go down this road, but it also shows how the ECR has continued to have a 'toxicity' in Brussels and Strasbourg. For the Socialists and Democrats, in particular, this would mean the EPP no longer valued the grand coalition with them that has kept European integration moving apace for many years. For the Greens, it would almost certainly mean the end of elements of the European Green Deal and the prioritising of net zero targets.

All political parties are large tents with different factions and none more so than Euro-parties and their federations in the European Parliament - they often include a range of different national delegations and are held together quite loosely in a bottom up way where domestic parties continue to have the most power. Fidesz used to be members of the EPP while the populist ANO party from the Czech Republic were members of Renew Europe's liberal predecessors, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE). Equally, however, it is important to not be dismissive of the member parties - they clearly tell us much about the overall policy positions of the parliamentary groups in Strasbourg and Brussels. Ultimately, it is difficult to ignore the presence of the Sweden Democrats and Vox, and indeed the increasing prominence of Brothers of Italy, in the 2019-2024 ECR faction. If the bulk of the evidence from the first section is orientated around the policies of the ECR, most of the evidence from this section concerns the national delegations. If to look at the manifesto and voting patterns of the European Conservatives during the 2014 - 2019 session, many would conclude that the group was 'centre right'. If to look at the members parties of the ECR during the 2019 - 2024 session, many might conclude that 'radical right' was a far better description.

The ECR as a distinctive Conservative party grouping in the European Parliament

Thus far, the article has described the respective arguments that the ECR is a moderate, centre-right political party (as the ECR themselves would have it) and the opposing view it is in fact a radical-right, extremist faction (as many of its opponents would argue). As far as the ninth session of the European Parliament is concerned, it is possible to find evidence to support both positions. However, it would be the contention of this article that these both essentially represent simplifications of the true nature of the ECR as a political movement in the European Union and the European Parliament. The ECR's stances on immigration and freedom of movement and inclusion of parties like Brothers of Italy and the Sweden Democrats, make it impossible to label them 'centre-right' and the way the party itself uses the term also suggests a partial attempt to mould public perceptions and image in a somewhat contrived fashion. However, equally, the group's more sophisticated stance on trade and the single market, Ukraine, and the influential role of MEPs from the New Flemish Alliance and the Czech Civic Democrats, also all prevent any simplistic attempts to narrowly place the ECR into a 'radical right' shaped box.

Indeed, the ECR member state party that can be said to personify this anomaly best is the Law and Justice party of Poland (PiS). Law and Justice from Poland were still providing continuity in the ECR from 2019 to 2024 and remained the largest national delegation by some way in the ninth session with 25 MEPs. PiS cannot be described as part of the EU establishment but equally the party is one with whom the EU establishment can do business. Its politicians may be ambivalent to aspects of immigration, open borders and socially liberal principles, and have a problematic approach to rule of law and the freedom of courts and the press - however, unlike many in the more emphatic radical right Identity and Democracy, they also appear to believe strongly in representative democracy, political and social institutions (for example, the Catholic Church), and are supportive of NATO and America. The party has never advocated Poland leaving the EU, expressed sadness that the United Kingdom chose to do so in 2016 (Law and Justice 2016) and has even set up a working group on how the EU ought to try to work closely with the United Kingdom despite Brexit (European Conservatives and Reformists 2024). The ninth session of the EP from 2024 to 2029 may well have seen the party enter a third

phase with the rise to prominence of Giorgia Meloni, but Law and Justice continued to be the group's driving force from 2019 to 2024, with former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki often organising and promoting events with a focus on European-wide security, geo-politics and Ukraine (see Derbyshire 2024).

A conservative respect for the role of *institutions* is often the most crucial variable in relation to what distinguishes parties such as PiS from parties such as National Rally (RN) in France or Alternative for Germany (AfD), no matter how similar they appear at times in terms of their more colourful electoral rhetoric. Radical right parties arguably want to start a type of revolution across society while parties like Law and Justice are much more orientated around maintaining *stability*. A respect for an institution like the Church is related to a respect for nation states and this has often led to misunderstandings around support for Brexit in the United Kingdom - while the UK leaving the EU was undoubtedly fuelled by nationalism and populism, there were also many people who voted for it on the grounds of sovereignty, a distaste for the idea that European law took primacy over English law, and the way the institutional role of Parliament in Westminster was diminished (see Clarke et al 2017). In other words, what is portrayed as *nationalism* and *populism* can sometimes, in fact, be *conservatism*. In his recent book, Hozamy (2022) argues that Conservatism is not merely about narrowly promoting free market economics or capitalism - it is a much wider political movement rooted in English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) and holding affection for societal institutions such as the family, the church and the law. To an extent, this goes some way to explaining why Conservatism is often conflated with both nationalism, which promotes traditional nation-state boundaries (see Anderson 1983), and populism, which often sees the state as the enemy of some institutions rather than itself being an institution (see Müller 2017).

While the ECR has 'radical right' elements in its party membership, ultimately, the overall policy direction of the group has tended to be more centrist, and there is also some evidence that the EU likes to try to keep the ECR inside the European Parliament's *cordon sanitaire* rather than outside - its leadership hoping the group will become more moderate not less moderate from 2024 to 2029. In the run up to the 2019 elections, the EPP and Ursula Von Der Leyen began to make it clear that they also distinguished the ECR

from ID - in one headline in the EU Observer (2024), it was reported that Von Der Leyen 'rejects extremism, leaves door open to the ECR'. As someone steeped in German coalition politics, Ursula Von Der Leyen knows that it is often vital to work with political opponents if the benefits outweigh the costs in the longer term - she served in the federal government in Berlin from 2005 to 2019 holding different portfolios and working with both Social Democrats and Free Democrats in the process. In parliamentary politics across Europe, and especially the politics of the European Parliament, coalitions are a political necessity - indeed, all parties are themselves coalitions.

Overall, the ECR is neither the entirely centre-right moderate vehicle which it itself claims to be, nor is it the 'radical right' extremist vehicle that its opponents label it. Instead, a realistic account of the ECR based on its activities in the ninth session of the EP is that it lies somewhere in between the EPP and ID on the ideological and policy spectrum, making the case consistently for *conservatism* and *conservative values* and fusing an enthusiasm for trade and Atlanticism with more traditional views on social policy and social issues - a type of Thatcherism and Reaganomics for the 2020s. As a consequence, it can also be argued that the ninth session of the European Parliament witnessed the ECR become truly established as a longstanding and recognisable 'Euro-party' organisation in Brussels and Strasbourg - no longer regarded as either merely a temporary break-away faction of the Christian democratic EPP nor as a radical right counterpart for Identity and Democracy. Over fifteen years, from 2009 to 2024, the ECR has steadily built up its organisational apparatus and staff, refining its core electoral messaging and fully utilising all the resources and budgets available to transnational party federations in the European Parliament.

Conclusions

By the end of the ninth European Parliament, public awareness of the European Conservatives and Reformists had never been higher, thanks in part to the figurehead of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni throwing her political weight behind the party from 2020 onwards (see Massetti 2023). During the 2014-2019, session, the group had actually been the third largest party ahead of the Liberal group but this received much

less attention and analysis. By the start of the 2024-2029 session of the European Parliament, many commentators and analysts chose to characterise the rise of the ECR in the EP as part of the rise in the 'radical right' across Europe and predicting the widespread political chaos that they believed would inevitably follow (see Derbyshire 2024). Clearly, the ECR is no longer the same political group as the one created by Prime Minister David Cameron along with Czech and Polish MEPs back in 2009 - however, it would be the contention of this article that, equally, it not true to say that the group's make up and policy position has completely changed either out of all recognition during this period. The overall organisational apparatus of the party has remained fundamentally intact and developed organically as well as effectively, with its leadership and professional staff cultivating clear messaging that locates it in ideological ground left vacant by both the centrist EPP and radical right ID.

The departure of the British Conservative national delegation after Brexit unquestionably changed the character of the group overall from a centre-right party with more radical-right elements to a group with a much radical-right overall public profile, albeit with centre-right elements remaining. Nevertheless, if to look at its various policy agenda and programmes from 2019 to 2024, rather than merely at its member parties, the ECR continued to fine tune and tighten its political messaging in a consistent 'Eurorealist' way. 'Eurorealism' as a concept has more substance and content than simple being a synonym for 'Euroscepticism' - it has a wider and deeper *conservative* focus upon global politics and international relations rather than simply providing a negative or critical view of the EU. Similarly, Conservatism, meanwhile, is also a unique and distinctive type of ideology which cannot simply be conflated with either the 'radical-right' or Christian democracy. Key ECR figures like Giorgia Meloni and the Czech MEP Jan Zahradil seem sincerely interested in conservative ideas and conservative thinkers (see Baldini et al 2022; Bressenelli and de Candia 2023).

The 2019-2024 session of the European Parliament also reinforced the European Conservatives and Reformists as an established and stable presence in the EP. The seventh session saw the grouping being set up while the eighth witnessed it continue to develop but it was the ninth session that witnessed the ECR become truly embedded in the Brussels and Strasbourg party landscape alongside longstanding and prominent

transnational party federations like the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). With its staff apparatus, resources and institutional memory, the ECR showed itself to be neither simply a replica of the EPP, nor of Identity and Democracy (ID), but a distinctive political organisation in its own right, representing the wider *conservative* party family across Europe.

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