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## **EPP MORE LIKELY TO EXPEL FIDESZ IF RIVAL GROUPS ALSO DITCH TROUBLEMAKERS**

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If mainstream political groups do not collectively expel their bad apples it could spell an end to measures by the EU to protect democracy in its member countries, write John Morijn and Israel Butler.

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Viktor Orbán's moves to dismantle liberal democracy have become increasingly unpalatable for Fidesz sister parties in the European Peoples Party. Some EPP members have long spoken out against Orbán. But the EPP has always balanced its conscience against the numbers. Fidesz brings it a prized 11 seats and in exchange for Fidesz loyalty, the EPP has been prepared to protect Orbán from EU pressure. As the EPP is projected to lose big in the upcoming elections, Fidesz might still avoid being bounced out if Orbán promises that his MEPs will support Manfred Weber when it comes to vote for the next Commission President.

But there might be numbers that could persuade the EPP to amputate its embarrassing member: if rival groups join in an unprecedented act of political solidarity for a higher purpose. An alternative #Vote4Values elections tracker (based on data from the poll of polls) launched by NGO Liberties highlights that, contrary to the conventional story-line that puts populists at the fringes, all of the four largest political groups in the European Parliament have member parties that have been targeted by European Parliament resolutions for attacking fundamental values like press freedom, judicial independence, equality and the right to peaceful protest. It is a collective problem in the heart of power in the European Parliament.

The second biggest political group, the centre-left Socialists and Democrats host three governing parties from Romania, Slovakia and Malta criticised by European Parliament resolutions. Poland's Law and Justice party, a frequent target of resolutions, belongs to the third biggest group in the European Parliament, the ECR. Czech PM Andrej Babiš was also recently the target of a European Parliament resolution that criticised his conflicts of interest for threatening democracy. His ANO party belongs to the fourth largest group, ALDE. ALDE also hosts the junior coalition partner party in the Romanian government.

If the S&D, ALDE and the ECR were to join the EPP in expelling their problematic members, then the cost to the EPP of losing Fidesz would be mitigated by a comparable cost to its rivals. They would all benefit from a principled choice and create a platform for a new start. Coalition politics is

normal in many EU countries. The #Vote4Values tracker illustrates three such possible pro-values coalitions that could reach a majority. The remainder of the cleansed political groups could therefore realistically entertain creating a governing coalition committed to the EUs foundational values: democratic pluralism, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

The stakes couldnt be higher. If mainstream political groups do not collectively expel their bad apples it could spell an end to measures by the EU to protect democracy in its member countries. According to Liberties analysis, it is predicted that at most 30% of MEPs in the next parliament could be considered as anti-values, if one includes the ENF and EFDD. This is far from a majority. But it could be all that is needed, given the way that political groups cover for their member parties. All it would take would be one of the larger groups, like the EPP, S&D or ALDE, to join the 30% on votes on particular topics. This is quite possible if one of the groups member parties is targeted by a resolution, either in name or by calling for new EU powers to scrutinise bad apples.

MEPs recognise this. Thats why they have hurried certain votes through parliament before the elections. In particular, a new funding programme for rights and democracy groups in the EU and a mechanism to cut EU funds to governments interfering with their judicial systems. Both measures are designed to help preserve minimum EU standards in the face of a slide towards authoritarianism. Both would be harder to push through after the elections.

Numbers back this up. According to Liberties #Vote4Values tracker, the problematic parties hosted by the EPP, S&D, the ECR and ALDE are, in general, going to increase their numbers of MEPs while the group numbers on the whole will shrink. This will give them even greater sway over the political groups that host them and give them relatively more clout. One neednt be a rocket scientist to predict where that is likely to lead.

A shake up of political groups and the way they cooperate sounds less radical if you look at the numbers. A large majority of around 70% of MEPs are predicted to be at least nominally pro-values. Forming a coalition that excludes anti-values MEPs would therefore be a no-brainer. But that can only happen if other mainstream political groups are prepared to join the EPP. Collectively giving up short-term political calculations, and cooperating rather than competing in the centre, is the likeliest way to ensure the long-term survival of very basic rules underlying EU cooperation.

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Kaynak/Source: