

# BRIEFING

## EUROPE OF NATIONS AND FREEDOM GROUP

### 1 Le Pen gets her group...

French National Front (FN) leader and MEP Marine Le Pen, with Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) leader Geert Wilders, has managed to create a parliamentary group, a year after the European elections. The 37-strong Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group includes MEPs from the minimum seven member states. Belgian, Italian, Polish, Austrian and British MEPs make up the numbers.

### 2 ...but it will be a fragile one

The ENF, like another anti-EU group, the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) will be fragile: it has the seven nationalities needed to form a group, but with only one Belgian, one Briton and two Poles, a single departure could lead to the group's collapse. When a Latvian MEP quit the EFDD Group in October 2014, Nigel Farage's formation looked set to fold - until a Polish MEP came to the rescue.

### 3 History lessons...

The last attempt to form a radical right-wing anti-EU group - known as 'Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty' (ITS) - collapsed after less than twelve months. In November 2007, five Romanian MEPs left ITS following disparaging remarks about Romanians by an Italian colleague (perhaps an occupational hazard in a group of nationalists). Two 'technical' right-wing groups were formed between 1984 and 1994.

### 4 ...and no other place to turn?

The formation of the ENF leaves just 15 non-attached (NI) MEPs, and few prospective members should the group need them. Hungary's Jobbik would create problems for Le Pen, keen to distance her party from previous accusations of anti-Semitism. Greece's Golden Dawn and Germany's NPD are too extreme. FN outcasts Bruno Gollnisch and Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father, remain as NI MEPs.

### 5 Different this time?

Money talks, and EU funding could be the glue that keeps the ENF together. The group is set to receive a grant of around €3m per year. In addition, it has more 'reliable' members than ITS did. Italy's Lega Nord and Austria's Freedom Party have been in government; Belgium's Vlaams Belang, the Netherlands' Party for Freedom (PVV) and the FN are all established parties with significant support, not mere flashes in the pan.

### 6 Will the ENF make a difference in votes?

The formation of the ENF does not change a lot for most interest representatives, for whom the ENF will be 'off-limits'. All 37 members were previously among the NI MEPs and would not have been reliable sources of votes - especially in an EPP-S&D-dominated Parliament. ENF support is likely to drive away other political groups, and ENF MEPs will be largely excluded from positions of power and influence.

### 7 How will other MEPs react...?

Within the Parliament, much will depend on the reaction of other political groups. All will be divided on how to respond - some will want a *cordon sanitaire* around the ENF; others will favour some kind of pragmatic incremental engagement with Le Pen *et al.* As ever, the national context will frequently drive MEPs' individual approaches - but few will want to ally publicly with members of the new group.



### 8 ...and what about the EP leadership?

Within the Parliament's Conference of Presidents (CoP) there are now three Eurosceptic or anti-EU forces represented (the ECR Group, the EFDD and the ENF) out of the eight groups. This creates a challenge for the EPP and S&D, even with their majority in the Parliament as a whole. The obvious response will be for the 'grand coalition' to bring Guy Verhofstadt and ALDE closer to prevent any difficulties in the CoP.

### Conclusion: the new normal?

The ENF comprises democratically-elected MEPs and represents a significant strain of thought in today's EU - witness the continued threat that the FN poses to mainstream parties in France. These parties are unlikely to disappear soon, and after the failed attempt to bring down the EFDD, mainstream parties may be wary of trying the same tactic twice. For better or worse, Europe may have to learn to live with the ENF.

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