

To Engage or Not to Engage with the Far Right?

How to navigate this shifting
political landscape in Europe?



Executive Summary

This How-to-Guide provides strategic support to civil society at a time when it must adapt to a new political landscape characterised by the far right's increasing influence. It is intended as a tool for internal discussions rather than a prescriptive manual, acknowledging that no universal solutions exist. Historically, civil society has avoided engaging with far-right parties due to value conflicts. While this was a plausible stance when these political forces had a more marginal role, this is no longer the case when their representatives hold key positions, such as EU Commissioners, chairs of European Parliament committees, rapporteurs, and governmental roles in several EU member states. As the new 2024-29 political environment requires a reassessment of traditional approaches, this How-to-Guide provides guidance on whether and how to weigh the risks against the opportunities for engagement.

Context

The 2024 European Parliament elections marked a significant rightward shift of power in the EU. The three groups sitting on the right of the dominant European Popular Party - Patriots of Europe (PfE), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) - now occupy over a quarter of the EU Parliament (26,52% of its seats), what inevitably led some of them to hold key roles in committees thus influencing legislative decisions.

Key Questions for Civil Society

The How-to-Guide highlights critical questions to help organisations assess whether and how to engage with far-right actors:

- **Contextual Factors:** What influence does the far-right representative actually wield, and how does it impact your organisation's goals?
- **Ethical Concerns:** Are the views of these actors compatible with democratic principles and human rights?
- **Strategic Gains:** Are there tangible benefits to engagement that outweigh potential reputational and ideological risks?

A Framework for Engagement

Where engagement is deemed necessary, the guide provides a structured approach:

1. **Define Internal Rules:** Establish transparent rules with clear red/orange lines, allow staff opt-outs, and update regularly.
2. **Consult National Members:** Seek local insights on delegations to understand political contexts beyond affiliations.
3. **Tailor Engagement Levels:** Adjust strategies from sharing positions to deeper collaboration, balancing influence and risk.
4. **Control External Messaging:** Proactively manage narratives, highlight outcomes, and disassociate if engagement backfires.

5. **Assess Risks Continuously:** Regularly review impacts, adapt strategies, and disengage if harm outweighs benefits.

Practical Tips and Strategies

The guide also offers **actionable strategies**, three concrete **case studies** from civil society organisations in EU member states, and potential **scenarios** illustrating the institutional roles far-right actors might assume during this mandate, along with guidance for effectively navigating each situation.

Conclusion

As civil society strives to navigate a new political landscape dominated by far-right representatives, this guide offers an analytical framework capable of assisting its organisations in making informed decisions and balancing the risks and opportunities stemming from such engagement. It aims at striking a balance between the pragmatic need to engage with controversial political representatives and parties while staying true to the organisations' core values.