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While [part one](#) of this article focused on the history and structure of the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament, part two dives deeper into their ideology and radicalization process, exemplified by the ECR Party think tank, New Direction.

Introduction

Behind the public face of the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament, an important role in the ideological production, strategy development, and network building is played by New Direction (ND), the think tank of the ECR Party. Founded in 2009, ND's operational scope includes cadre and leadership training, the organization of events, as well as various publishing endeavors.¹

With Margaret Thatcher as founding patroness, ND was long dominated by the Tories, and although the British are not represented in the European Parliament any longer, they still exert some influence on EU politics through ND—for example, by way of the former military intelligence bigwig Geoffrey van Orden, a founding president of the think tank. From the outset, the think tank has been considerably influenced by the American right as well. To this day, a multitude of US right-wing and libertarian organizations and lobby groups are among ND's partners and supporters. They include the Heritage Foundation and the Acton Institute, two of the main vehicles used by US mega-donors to fund the Christian right in Europe, as well as Koch-supported organizations in and around the Atlas Network.

With ECR's composition moving further to the right, the fusionism of the Thatcher era has been increasingly challenged by a growing national conservative faction that is seeking to assert its influence over ECR's member parties, which are, overall, of a heterogeneous right-wing to far-right provenance. Their influence is strongly propelled by the National Conservatism Conference, organized by the US-based, Zionist Edmund Burke Foundation, one of ND's strategic partners.

To establish an overview of the structure, activities, and ideology of the think tank, this article draws on multiple sources, notably past and current versions of ND's website and social media profiles, as well as those of affiliate organizations, organizational and financial records provided to EU authorities, profiles on professional network services, press items from various countries, and investigations by watchdog organizations.

¹ New Direction, accessed July 18, 2024, <https://newdirection.online>. Previously, the New Direction website was hosted under different URLs: <http://newdirectionfoundation.org/> and <http://europeanreform.org/>.

Structure

Leadership

New Direction was established on October 1, 2009, and was launched in the City of London by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013), who became the organization’s patroness.² Initially, ND was very much under British dominance, and even today, half a decade after Brexit, there are still Brits in key positions of the think tank.

In comparison to the often-changing composition of the ECR Group and Party and their respective leadership, members of ND are more constant. And some members of the initial leadership team are still present, such as ND’s former Vice President Tomasz Poręba (born 1973), an MEP of the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party, who today serves as president of the think tank; or ND’s founding president, Geoffrey van Orden (born 1945), who was “instrumental in the formation” of ECR and today is one of ND’s vice presidents.³

Before embarking on a long tenure as MEP in the EU Parliament (1999–2020), van Orden had an impressive career in military intelligence. In 1989, he was chief of staff of the British Sector in Berlin and headed the military intelligence staff when the Wall fell. His final military appointment was as Brigadier-General at NATO Headquarters in Brussels.⁴

ND’s president, Tomasz Poręba, had been a member of the EU Parliament for 15 years, mostly for the PiS party, when in April 2024, he announced that he would not run for another term.⁵ On November 9, 2023, the European Parliament had lifted his immunity in connection with a lawsuit brought against several PiS MEPs by Rafał Gawł from the Center for Monitoring Racist and Xenophobic Behavior, who accused them of racist crimes related to the dissemination of a campaign ad in Poland during the PiS election in 2018.⁶

Besides the president, the ND executive board consists of eight vice presidents, as well as the ECR Party’s Secretary General Antonio Giordano. The vice presidents are largely active or former MPs or MEPs of one of ECR’s member parties: Geoffrey van Orden (former MEP, Conservative Party, UK); Roberts Zīle (MEP, National Alliance, Latvia); Raffaele Fitto (MP, Brothers of Italy [FdI], Italy); Karol Karski (former MEP, PiS, Poland); Valdemar Tomasevski (MEP, Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania–

² “About,” New Direction, archived copy from October 23, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221023164807/https://newdirection.online/about>; “New Direction - Audit Report 2010” (European Parliament, July 18, 2011), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/contracts-and-grants/files/political-parties-and-foundations/audit-reports-and-donations/foundations/nd/nd-report-2010.pdf>.

³ “About Us,” New Direction Foundation for European Reform, archived copy from November 13, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101113025855/http://newdirectionfoundation.org/pages/about-us.php>.

⁴ “Geoffrey Van Orden,” LinkedIn page, accessed September 27, 2024, <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/geoffrey-van-orden-cbe-0373397a>.

⁵ Marcin Bugaj, “‘Dalszego ciągu nie będzie.’ Znany polityk PiS kończy karierę,” *Do Rzeczy*, April 22, 2024, <https://dorzeczy.pl/opinie/578349/dalszego-ciagu-nie-bedzie-tomasz-poreba-konczy-kariere.html>.

⁶ “Europosłowie PiS pozbawieni immunitetów. Jest decyzja,” *Onet Wiadomości*, November 9, 2023, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/europoslowie-pis-pozbawieni-immunitetow-parlament-zdecydowal/6gyhnp3>.

Christian Families Alliance, Lithuania); Marko Milanović Litre (MP, Croatian Sovereignists, Croatia); Rob Roos (former MEP, Independent, Netherlands); and Angel Dzhambazki (former MEP, VMRO, Bulgaria).⁷

ND's staff is led by an executive director, the Belgian Witold d'Humilly de Chevilly (September 2020–present), a descendant of a French aristocratic family line that can be traced back to the 16th century, who recently made headlines for his Azerbaijan lobbying, including an unsolicited trip to Baku in 2023 alongside ND President Tomasz Poręba.⁸ De Chevilly wishes to “uniformly steer the way of the right-wing movements in the cultural struggle,” which he mentioned at the opening of the Brussels office of the Hungary-based extreme right-wing journal, *The European Conservative*, which has been prominently featured at ND events in the past.⁹

Before de Chevilly, the organization had had three other directors: Shane Frith (July 2010–October 2012), from New Zealand; as well as Tom Miers (January 2013–December 2014) and Naweed Khan (ca. 2015–2019), from the UK.¹⁰ Khan, who during his time at ND “served as a Special Advisor at the Cabinet Office and at the UK's Foreign Office, under Prime Minister David Cameron,” had been a close

⁷ “About,” New Direction, accessed July 17, 2024, <https://newdirection.online/about>.

⁸ “Claude d'Humilly,” Geni, September 2, 2023, <https://www.geni.com/people/Claude-D-HUMILLY/6000000197854525779>; “Witold de Chevilly,” LinkedIn page, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://be.linkedin.com/in/witold-de-chevilly-86682256>; Rasmus Canbäck, Sascha Düerkop, and Andrew Rettman, “Polish MEP Also Went on Freelance Azerbaijan Trip,” euobserver, February 7, 2023, <https://euobserver.com/world/156688>.

⁹ Orbán Tamás, “Az oroszlan barlangjában–megnyílt a European Conservative brüsszeli irodája,” Mandiner, February 13, 2023, <https://mandiner.hu/kulfold/2023/02/european-conservative-brusszel>; *European Conservative*, <https://europeanconservative.com/>.

¹⁰ “Shane Frith,” LinkedIn page, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/shanefrith>; “Tom Miers,” LinkedIn page, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/tom-miers-b950786>.

EXECUTIVE BOARD



Raffaele Fitto
Italy
Vice President



Karol Karski
Poland
Vice President



Roberts Zile
Latvia
Vice President



Angel Dzhambazki
Bulgaria
Vice President



Geoffrey Van Orden
United Kingdom
Vice President



Rob Roos
The Netherlands
Vice President



Valdemar Tomasevski
Lithuania
Vice President



Marko Milanović Litre
Croatia
Vice President



Antonio Giordano
Italy
ECR Party Secretary General

MANAGEMENT



Witold de Chevilly
Belgium / Poland
Executive Director



Robert Tyler
United Kingdom
Senior Policy Advisor

New Direction board as of July 2024.
Source: <https://newdirection.online/about>.

collaborator of Lord Daniel Hannan, a Tory MEP from 1999 to 2020, who served as the first secretary general of the ECR Party from 2009 to 2018 and was a vice president of ND from 2018 to 2019.¹¹ The *Financial Times* singled out Hannan's Oxford Campaign for an Independent Britain as the point of departure for the Brexit movement, and the *Guardian* dubbed Hannan "the man who brought you Brexit," since he was among the co-founders of Vote Leave, an organization advocating for the UK's exit from the EU in 2016.¹²

Khan is a prime example of the revolving-door mechanism between ND and the private sector as well as libertarian and right-wing think tanks and lobbying organizations. The former ND director changed swiftly to a leadership post at AT&T, a major donor to ND in the past. Today, he sits on the Board of Trustees of Oikos, the think tank of the Sweden Democrats, a far-right party that is a member of the ECR Party and Group.¹³

ND's management team includes another Brit, Robert Tyler, ND's senior policy adviser. In 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum, Tyler finished his master's degree in Security and Intelligence studies

¹¹ "Naweed Khan," New Lines Institute, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/people/naweed-khan/>.

¹² Simon Kuper, "How Oxford University Shaped Brexit—and Britain's Next Prime Minister," *Financial Times*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/85fc694c-9222-11e9-b7ea-60e35ef678d2>; Sam Knight, "The Man Who Brought You Brexit," *Guardian*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/sep/29/daniel-hannan-the-man-who-brought-you-brexit>.

¹³ "Förtroenderåd," Oikos, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://www.oikos.se/17/3/fortroenderad/>.

at the University of Buckingham with a dissertation titled “Post Brexit Security and Foreign Policy.” After that, he was an adviser at the EU Parliament for Counter Terrorism Policy, Counter Extremism Policy and Foreign Policy (Middle East/Eastern Europe), and Brexit. From 2019 to May 2021, he worked first for the ECR Party as a strategist before joining ND as senior policy adviser.¹⁴

Although not mentioned on the website, ND lists another employee, Julian Kroon (born 2001), on its LinkedIn page. Kroon, a young politician of the far-right Sweden Democrats, has been designated as a project manager since August 2023.¹⁵

Until 2023, ND had also specified two senior advisers: the former Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbot (born 1957), a member of the hard right faction of the Liberal Party and a supporter of the Australia’s relationship to the British monarchy, whose political style has been compared to that of Donald Trump.¹⁶ That position was also held by Jorge Quiroga (born 1960), former Vice President to the Bolivian military dictator Hugo Banzer (1926–2002), who later in life became President of Bolivia (2001–2002). Previously, two country-specific coordinators were also listed: Catherine Bray, as Director of US Outreach (2012); and a Poland & Eastern Neighbourhood Coordinator (2013–2015), Krzysztof Grzelczyk.¹⁷

Until 2015, ND listed an Advisory Council on its website, which remained the same over the years: Norman Stone (UK), Frits Bolkestein (Netherlands), Vikram Sood (India), Giles Merritt (UK), and Zdzislaw Krasnodebski (Poland). The Dutchman Frits Bolkestein was the former European Commissioner for Internal Market (1999–2004), who had earned a reputation as “the Conservatives’ Commissioner.”¹⁸ Bolkestein is known for his extreme opportunism, including his presence on the international consultative council of the former Bank Menatep (founded by the Russian magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, now exiled in London), and for his work for the British multinational oil and gas company Shell.¹⁹ Another important figure on the advisory board was Vikram Sood, the former head of India’s external intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).²⁰

¹⁴ “Robert Tyler,” LinkedIn page, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://be.linkedin.com/in/rgytler>.

¹⁵ “Julian Kroon,” LinkedIn page, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/julian-kroon-547105215/>.

¹⁶ Peter Lewis, “What If Australia Already Had Its ‘Trump Moment’—and It Was Tony Abbott?,” *Guardian*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/30/what-if-australia-already-had-its-trump-moment-and-it-was-tony-abbott>.

¹⁷ “Staff,” New Direction, archived copy from July 28, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120728001325/http://newdirectionfoundation.org:80/content/staff>;

“Staff,” New Direction, archived copy from April 1, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130401052405/http://newdirectionfoundation.org/content/staff>.

¹⁸ Thilo Janssen, “Die Europäisierung der rechten EU-Gegner: Rechte europäische Parteien und rechte Fraktionen im Europäischen Parlament vor den Europawahlen 2014” (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, January 2013), 16, https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Studien/Europaeisierung_der_rechten_EU-Gegner.pdf.

¹⁹ Paul van Buitenen, “Parliamentary Question: Clearstream, Menatep and Bolkestein,” European Parliament website, accessed October 3, 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-6-2005-2075_EN.html.

²⁰ “About Us,” New Direction Foundation for European Reform.

Finances

Although New Direction receives most of its funds from the EU budget, the donations it secured are proportionally higher than those granted to the other think tanks associated with Europarties. Although the ECR Group members make up only around 10% of the European Parliament, from “the total amount of money donated [to all Europarty think tanks] ... New Direction got 64 percent of the total in 2020 and 42 percent in 2021,” according to Follow the Money, an EU watchdog group.²¹ Over the years, the most donations have come from Poland, followed by the United Kingdom, Spain, and the Czech Republic.²²

While Europarties are not allowed to receive donations from individuals, organizations, or companies outside of the EU, their associated think tanks can.²³ Thus, one can find a considerable footprint of foreign donors—particularly Americans, who rank fifth in terms of frequency of donations. Among the non-EU donors are notably persons and organizations from tax havens, such as Liechtenstein and Switzerland, and from countries as far away as Argentina.

The American donors include Americans for Tax Reform, American Freedom Alliance, the Atlas Network (formerly known as the Atlas Economic Research Foundation), the DCI Group, FreedomWorks, the Heritage Foundation, and the Taxpayers Protection Alliance. Donations seem to function as a door opener, since representatives of most of these organizations continue to be present at ND events, where they can lobby for their causes and services, such as is the case with the Heritage Foundation or Americans for Tax Reform.

Comparing the financial audits of the think tank in the period from 2009 to 2024, one can see changes in the donors in relation to the parties that are members of the ECR Group and Party at the time. For example, after joining ECR in 2018, Fratelli d'Italia (led by current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni) provided €52,500 up through 2020.²⁴ And after the Spanish Vox party joined ECR in 2019, several Spanish donors emerged, notably Vox's think tank Fundación Disenso, which had donated annually to ND from 2021 to 2023, totaling €45,150.²⁵

Among the most faithful donors over the years have also been big corporations, such as AT&T Belgium, which in the period from 2012 to 2017 donated the maximum amount of €12,000 each year, and even more in 2018 and 2019, when the limit was raised to €18,000.²⁶

²¹ Jesse Pincer, “The Think Tank of the ECR Party Has Been Receiving Unlawful Donations,” Follow The Money, September 28, 2023, <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/financial-backer-conservative-right-european-parliament>.

²² See audit reports of New Direction for these years: European Parliament, “Audits Reports and Donations,” European Parliament, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/contracts-and-grants/en/political-parties-and-foundations/audit-reports-and-donations>; “Donations and Contributions,” Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://appf.europa.eu/appf/en/donations-and-contributions>.

²³ Alexander Katsaitis, “International Parliamentary Institutions and Political Donations: The Case of the European Parliament,” *International Affairs* 99, no. 6 (November 2023): 2443–63.

²⁴ European Parliament, “Audit Reports and Donations.”

²⁵ Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations, “Donations and Contributions.”

²⁶ European Parliament, “Audit Reports and Donations.”

Reporters have noted several donations of opaque, if not illegal, provenance to the think tank. One case concerns the Estonian company Amundsen Travel, which is run by an Austrian, Lukas Schweiger.²⁷ Amundsen Travel has donated twice to ND: in 2018 and 2021, to the tune of €12,000 and €10,800, respectively, “while the company barely made a profit and had hardly any turnover.”²⁸ Amundsen Travel also donated €18,000 to the ECR Party in 2022 and 2023.²⁹

From 2014 to 2015, Schweiger sat on the International Executive Board of Students for Liberty, funded, among others, by the Koch family, which until today dispatches representatives to important ND events.³⁰ “Incidentally, previous shareholders of Amundsen Travel ... include Students for Liberty co-founder Alexander McCobin and Frederik Roeder, currently managing director of the Consumer Choice Center ... whose European operations got seed money from Students for Liberty,” according to *Politico*.³¹

New Direction has received unlawful donations in at least one instance. The aforementioned report by Follow the Money noted in 2023 that, “Since 2017, a total of 208,000 euros was transferred to the think tank” by six Czech companies belonging to or affiliated with Kamil Bahbouh, but the regulators have so far not intervened.³² Whether the Czech member party of ECR, ODS, may have something to do with the donations has been a matter of speculation. According to the Czech news portal Seznam Zprávy, Bahbouh’s payments came from the same murky credit union (Podnikatelská družstevní záložna, PDZ) that Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, of the ODS party, used for part of his savings, but without disclosing his stake in the credit union in his asset declaration.³³ Furthermore, “A total of 280,000 euros then came from the Brussels foundation [New Direction] to the think tank Právý břeh–Petr Fiala Institute, which bears Fiala’s name,” with the prime minister reasoning “that it is payments for contracts that the Petr Fiala Institute won for New Direction,” according to Seznam Zprávy.³⁴ That ND doles out large sums in support of partner organizations is not limited to this one case. In 2022, the think tank had reportedly paid a five-figure sum for a stall at the American Conservative Action Political Conference (CPAC) in Orlando, Florida.³⁵

²⁷ Sarah Wheaton, “ECR Donors: Travel Agents and Koch Links,” *Politico*, April 11, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/politico-eu-influence/ecr-donors-travel-agents-and-koch-links-2/>.

²⁸ Pinstar, “The Think Tank of the ECR Party Has Been Receiving Unlawful Donations.”

²⁹ “Party Donations: ECR,” DonationWatch, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://donation.watch>.

³⁰ “Students for Liberty—Annual Report 2014–2015,” Students for Liberty, <https://studentsforliberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/sfl-annual-report-2015-web.pdf>.

³¹ Wheaton, “ECR Donors: Travel Agents and Koch Links.” On recent ND events at which Students for Liberty were present, see “ESFL’s Stefan Acimovic and Tamar Tarsaidze Are Joining New Direction at Their Think Tank Central: Defending Freedom Conference,” Students for Liberty, September 1, 2022, <https://studentsforliberty.org/blog/esfl-new-direction-think-tank-central/>; “21st–22nd September 2023 Think Tank Central—Advancing Freedom: Madrid, Spain,” New Direction, accessed September 25, 2024, https://newdirection.online/event/think_tank_central_advancing_freedom.

³² Pinstar, “The Think Tank of the ECR Party Has Been Receiving Unlawful Donations.”

³³ Janek Kroupa, “Fialovo ‘zapomenuté’ konto. Za pět let vydělal v záložně směšnou částku,” Seznam Zprávy, February 20, 2024, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-kauzy-fialovo-zapomenute-konto-za-pet-let-vydelal-v-zalozne-smesnou-castku-246076>.

³⁴ Kroupa, “Fialovo ‘zapomenuté’ konto. Za pět let vydělal v záložně směšnou částku.”

³⁵ Peter Stone, “Critics Accuse CPAC of Becoming Pay-to-Play as Trump Loyalists Gain Power,” *Guardian*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/14/cpac-pay-to-play-trump-loyalists-gain-power>.

Partner Organizations

In an early version of the New Direction website, there was a “partners” section, with a changing list of organizations and think tanks, some of which are still connected to New Direction.³⁶ In later versions of the website, no partners are designated as such, but they can be inferred from lists of participants in ND events, projects and publications, in which certain organizations are repeatedly present (see below). Comparing these early partner organizations with the list of donors over the years, as well as the organizations involved in ND activities, there is a continuous overlap.

Among the longstanding supporters of ND are, for example, the Austrian Economics Center (AEC) and the Friedrich A. v. Hayek Institute, both based at the same address in Vienna.³⁷ As late as September 2023, AEC co-hosted an event with ND in Madrid.³⁸ President of the Hayek Institute and founding director of the AEC, Barbara Kolm doubles as the vice president of the Austrian Central Bank.³⁹ In 2014, Kolm had donated the maximum amount of €12,000 to ND. Using the same address as Kolm (Jasomirgottstrasse 3, Vienna), a company called Triple-A Analytics donated €12,000 in 2010, and another company called Triple-A Project Marketing contributed €12,000 in both 2012 and 2013, and €2000 euros in 2015.⁴⁰ The German Hardy Bouillon (born 1960), who had served as Deputy Director of ND from 2012 to 2013 and in 2014 as research coordinator, today chairs the Scientific Advisory Board of the Hayek Institute.⁴¹ Kolm, Bouillon, and other ND affiliates, such as Alvino-Mario Fantini, editor-in-chief of the *European Conservative*, are members of the US-based Mont Pelerin Society, dedicated to promoting Austrian economics, a free-market fundamentalist current whose trailblazers were Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich A. Hayek.

Activities

Events

On its website, ND presents an events, projects, and publications section. ND’s events are for the most part geared at bringing together representatives of organizations associated or sympathizing with ECR member parties, including political think tanks and lobby groups in and around the European Parliament. A prime example is the event series Think Tank Central, with a focus on inviting representatives of national party think tanks and putting them in touch with extra-parliamentary support groups. Sometimes ND invites representatives of parties not affiliated with ECR, such as the

³⁶ See archived versions of “Partners list,” New Direction, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120229231912/http://newdirectionfoundation.org/about-us/partner-think-tanks>. The author counted 28 partner organizations appearing over time: Adriatic Institute, Austrian Economics Center, Berlin Manhattan Institute, CADI-Eleutheria, Captus, Center for Political Thought, Centre for the Study of Democracy and Culture, Cevro, Civismo, Conservative Institute, E2E2, European Coalition of Economic Growth, Economic and Social Research Center, European Independent Institute, Freedom and Reform Institute, Hayek Institute, Icelandic Research Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Katon, Kosciuszko Institute, Libera!, Liberalni Institute, Lithuanian Free Market Institute, L’Institut économique Molinari, Progressive Vision, Think Foundation, Raggruppamento Europa Sociale, and Quid Novi Foundation.

³⁷ Friedrich A. v. Hayek Institut, <https://hayek-institut.at/>; Austrian Economics Center, <https://austriancenter.com/>.

³⁸ New Direction, “21st–22nd September 2023 Think Tank Central—Advancing Freedom: Madrid, Spain.”

³⁹ “Board,” Austrian Economics Center, accessed July 14, 2024, <https://austriancenter.com/organization/>.

⁴⁰ European Parliament, “Audit Reports and Donations.”

⁴¹ “Organisation,” Hayek Institute, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://hayek-institut.at/organisation/>.

Hungarian Fidesz party, or functionaries of other EU political groups, like the center-right European People's Party (EPP), to sound out common ground on single issues to be put to vote in the EU Parliament.

Events are often co-organized with local host organizations across Europe, and sometimes overseas. Having analyzed the most recent iteration of the Think Tank Central event in Madrid in September 2023, the final schedule included a list of around 45 participating organizations (and more unlisted ones), as well as 51 speakers.⁴² The organizations present fell largely into three categories.

Firstly, some participants were dispatched from ECR member parties or their think tanks. Among the latter were several representatives of Vox's *Fundación Disenso*, which was among the hosting organizations; *Fratelli d'Italia's* *Nazione Futura*; *Oikos* of the Sweden Democrats; and *Suomen Perusta* of the True Finns.

A second group of representatives came from affiliate organizations of national parties, such as the French *Institut des Sciences Sociales, Économiques et Politiques (ISSEP)* run by Marion Maréchal, the Polish Warsaw Institute, and the Croatian Centre of Cultural Renewal. Although Fidesz is not part of ECR, there were, notably, representatives of four Fidesz-sponsored organizations: *Foundation for a Civic Hungary*, *Center for Fundamental Rights*, the *Mathias Corvinus Collegium*, and the *European Conservative*—all at the forefront of the Hungarian government's right-wing culture war.⁴³ Among the Fidesz participants at the Madrid event was Orbán's "attack dog," Frank Furedi of the Brussels branch of the *Mathias Corvinus Collegium*, which has received billions of dollars from the Fidesz government while drying out the public education system.⁴⁴

A third group of participants belonged to right-wing libertarian organizations of various shades. This comes as no surprise, considering that the Austrian Economics Center was a co-organizer of the event, whose president, Barbara Kolm, appeared as a speaker and panel host. Notably, they included a trio of related American organizations: *Students for Liberty*, *Alumni for Liberty*, and the *Consumer Choice Center*, which have reportedly received substantial donations from the Koch family in the past. They are part of the larger *Atlas Network*, also majorly funded by the Kochs, which had donated a total of €27,975 from 2011 to 2013 to ND.⁴⁵ Another participating organization, the *Center for a Secure and Free Society*, is a direct offspring of the *Atlas Network*.⁴⁶

Overall, the footprint of American libertarian and right-wing support organizations is striking. These made up a third of the organizations present, among them the *Heritage Foundation* and the *Acton*

⁴² "21st–22nd September 2023: Think Tank Central—Advancing Freedom: Madrid, Spain," *New Direction*, accessed July 18, 2023, https://newdirection.online/event/think_tank_central_advancing_freedom.

⁴³ Ellen Rivera, "Orbán's Hungary: A Launching Pad for the 21st-Century Reconquista," *IERES Occasional Papers*, *Transnational History of the Far Right*, no. 25 (July 2024), <https://www.historyofthefarright.org/orbans-hungary-a-launching-pad-for-the-21st-century-reconquista/>.

⁴⁴ Gian Volpicelli, "From Trotsky to Brexit to Orbán's Attack Dog: The Man Leading Hungary's Fightback against the EU," *Politico*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/trotsky-brexit-viktor-orban-attack-dog-frank-furedi-hungary-fightback-eu/>.

⁴⁵ "Students for Liberty (SFL)," *Greenpeace USA*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/fighting-climate-chaos/climate-deniers/front-groups/students-for-liberty/>; "The Koch-Funded Atlas Network Is Also Targeting Europe," *Multinationals Observatory*, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://multinationales.org/en/investigations/the-atlas-network-france-and-the-eu/>.

⁴⁶ "About SFS," *Center for a Secure Free Society*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.securefreesociety.org/about-sfs/>.

Institute—two key funding channels employed by major American donors to support the Christian right in Europe.⁴⁷ Other American organizations included Americans for Tax Reform and its sister organizations, the Tholos Foundation and the Property Rights Alliance, the Ayn Rand Institute, the Edmund Burke Foundation, and the National Conservatism Conference.

In turn, ND also participates in events organized by its affiliates, such as the European Resource Bank meeting, hosted by the Austrian Economics Center, which is “modelled after the Resource Bank meeting organized by the Heritage Foundation in the United States and the Liberty Forum organized by the Atlas Economic Research Foundation.”⁴⁸ Also the long-lasting collaboration between ND and the Atlas Network has resulted in the joint organization of events, such as the Festival of Liberty in Madrid, as mentioned in a 2018 issue of the Atlas Network’s quarterly, *Freedom’s Champion*.⁴⁹

Projects

Currently, ND lists four main projects on its website: Working Group on European Conservatism, Círculo Maura, Young Leaders Academy, and European Conservative Students.⁵⁰ Linked as a project but not listed is also (Re) Discovering Conservatism, a video series in which key influencers and supporters of ND are interviewed.⁵¹

According to ND’s website, the Círculo Maura is a project in collaboration with Vox’s think tank Fundación Disenso, “to reflect on the great works of Western political thought,” a five-month training course that first took place from April to November 2023, with two sessions monthly at the headquarters of the foundation.⁵² The program was directed by Guillermo Graiño, “Professor of Political Theory at the Francisco de Vitoria University and director of its Center for Democracy Studies.”⁵³ A second training course has started in May 2024 and is supposed to be running until December, again taking place at the Fundación Disenso and with Graiño being the instructor.⁵⁴ However, since Vox dropped out of ECR and joined the newly founded EU political group Patriots of Europe, spearheaded by Viktor Orbán, it is questionable whether the initiative will continue.

Young Leaders Academy is another project that ND has launched together with Fundación Disenso whose fate is uncertain. Its aim is to educate “future political and social leaders in Iberosphere countries about the functioning of the European Union, and its importance to the transatlantic

⁴⁷ Neil Datta, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009–2018” (Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, June 2021), <https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Tip%20of%20the%20Iceberg%20June%202021%20Final.pdf>.

⁴⁸ “About,” European Resource Bank Meeting, accessed July 17, 2024, <https://europeanresourcebank.org/about/>.

⁴⁹ *Freedom’s Champion* (Atlas Network: Fall 2018), 11, https://admin.atlasnetwork.org/assets/documents/magazines/FCQ3_Single_Pages.pdf.

⁵⁰ “Projects,” New Direction, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://newdirection.online/projects>.

⁵¹ (Re)Discovering Conservatism,” New Direction, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://newdirection.online/rediscovering-conservatism>.

⁵² “3rd May–29th November 2023: Círculo Maura,” New Direction, accessed July 12, 2024, https://newdirection.online/event/circulo_maura_2023.

⁵³ New Direction, “3rd May–29th November 2023: Círculo Maura.”

⁵⁴ “16th May–19th December 2024: Círculo Maura: Contemporary Thought Seminar,” New Direction, accessed July 12, 2024, https://newdirection.online/event/circulo_maura_contemporary_thought_seminar.

alliance.”⁵⁵ Its fourth meeting is scheduled for November 2024, in which “for two weeks the group of selected young leaders will be immersed in an exclusive education programme that will take place in the United States, Spain, Italy, Israel and Hungary.”⁵⁶

A third project is that of European Conservative Students (ECS), aimed at creating “a pan-European conservative student movement” that “will not have individual members, but rather be a high-level organizing network, convened by New Direction, where membership will be open to conservative student organizations active on the national level.”⁵⁷ The last meeting of the ECS was in December 2023 in Stockholm.⁵⁸ The ECS is presumably the successor of the European Young Conservatives, an ECR and ND-affiliated grouping that seems to have gone dormant in the meantime.

Working Group on European Conservatism

In 2022, New Direction launched the Working Group on European Conservatism (sometimes Working Group on Conservatism in Europe, WGEC).⁵⁹ WGEC brings together a select group of political operatives hailing predominantly from think tanks of extreme right-wing ECR member parties, such as Fundación Disenso of the Vox party; the Fratelli d’Italia-affiliated Nazione Futura and Fondazione Tatarella; as well as Oikos of the Sweden Democrats. According to ND’s website, the WGCE “is a partnership of institutes ... to identify and define European conservative ideas and traditions, as a starting point for a wider conversation that could draw out common principles.”⁶⁰

As a sort of King Arthur’s Round Table, WGEC gathers the inner core of a much larger network of organizations, think tanks, and journals to forge the ideological reorientation of ECR in its drift further to the right, all the while keeping out most of the other partner organizations within ECR. Its closed meetings consist of a lecture part, where participants give presentations on changing topics, such as “Religion and Politics, Church and State”; as well as a discussion part, overall aimed at drafting a “conservative manifesto.”⁶¹

ND recently published a statement of the working group, “a living document that will be added too [sic] in the future as more meetings are held.” Therein, it argues for a Europe of “individual sovereign national states,” without a central apparatus imposing any requirements or restrictions on its members. Much attention is given to the cultural and religious dimension of the conservative cause. The text states that “Any meaningful European Conservatism must be founded upon acknowledging Judeo-Christian values,” and that “Every country has a public religion, underpinning transcendental truth” which it should “assign a place in the public square.” Furthermore, it argues indirectly for lower rates and more selective types of immigration, all the while arguing that “governments should adopt policies intended to fortify and reward traditional families in order to pursue a beneficial

⁵⁵ “New Direction & Fundación Disenso: Young Leaders Academy,” New Direction, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://newdirection.online/young-leaders-academy>.

⁵⁶ New Direction, “New Direction & Fundación Disenso: Young Leaders Academy.”

⁵⁷ “European Conservative Students,” New Direction, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://newdirection.online/ecs>.

⁵⁸ “1st–3rd December, European Conservative Students–Conference, Stockholm, Sweden,” New Direction, accessed July 12, 2024, https://newdirection.online/event/european_conservative_students_conference.

⁵⁹ “Working Group on European Conservatism,” New Direction, accessed July 11, 2024, https://newdirection.online/working_group_on_european_conservatism.

⁶⁰ New Direction, “Working Group on European Conservatism.”

⁶¹ “Nazione Futura nel network europeo di European Conservative,” Nazione Futura, September 8, 2023, <http://www.nazionefutura.it/esteri/nazione-futura-nel-network-europeo-di-european-conservative/>.

demographic future.” Overall, “The objective should be nothing less than the rediscovery and restoration of that intellectual and spiritual path that would rescue Europe from the current road that leads to loss of all hope.”⁶²

Besides think tanks of ECR member parties, WGEC regulars are affiliated with organizations and publications that have been championing the concept of national conservatism. They notably include the US-based Edmund Burke Foundation (the organizer of the National Conservatism Conference) and the Israeli Herzl Institute, both founded and led by radical Zionists; as well as *The European Conservative* (TEC) journal and the Danube Institute of John O’Sullivan, both funded by the Fidesz government.⁶³ A frequent participant of WGEC meetings is Ofir Haivry, co-founder and vice president of the Herzl Institute and co-founder and distinguished fellow of the Edmund Burke Foundation.⁶⁴ Also, TEC staffers, such as its editor-in-chief, Alvino-Mario Fantini, and its contributing editor, David Engels, have been spotted at WGEC events.⁶⁵ Also present have been representatives of the Legatum Institute, a London-based think tank founded by the New Zealand-born billionaire Christopher Chandler in 2007, which, according to Open Democracy, has been “arguably the most influential think tank in Britain pushing its free market pro-Brexit vision and enjoying privileged access to media and ministers.”⁶⁶

Publishing

ND’s sprawling publishing activities include *The European Journal* since 2020 (which was formerly called the *ND Magazine* until 2018). Reports in nine languages are constantly added, addressing single issues ranging from foreign policy to identity politics.⁶⁷ Its annual *Brochure* gives an overview of the central activities in a single year.⁶⁸ ND has published 16 books in four languages, among them some extreme right-wing texts from the past and present. For example, it published a translation of a text by Joseph De Maistre, who was an advocate of social hierarchy and monarchy following the French Revolution.⁶⁹ At least two other books deal with the subject of monarchy as legitimate state form, such as *On Patriotism, Parties, and the Idea of a Patriot King*, by Henry St. John Bolingbroke, or *Of the King and the Royal Institution*, by Juan de Mariana.⁷⁰ Another book, *Twenty-Four Conservative-*

⁶² New Direction, “Working Group on European Conservatism.”

⁶³ Ofir Haivry on Twitter, June 9, 2023, <https://twitter.com/haivry/status/1667172770055168000>.

⁶⁴ “Ofir Haivry,” LinkedIn page, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://il.linkedin.com/in/ofir-haivry-6a000bb9>; “Ofir Haivry, PhD,” Mathias Corvinus Collegium, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://mcc.hu/en/person/dr-ofir-haivry>.

⁶⁵ The European Conservative, Facebook page, March 11, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=686111010184658>.

⁶⁶ Peter Geoghegan, “Legatum: The Brexiteers’ Favourite Think Tank. Who Is behind Them?,” *OpenDemocracy*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/legatum-who-are-brexiteers-favourite-think-tank-and-who-is-behind-them/>.

⁶⁷ “Reports,” New Direction, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://newdirection.online/publications/reports>.

⁶⁸ “Brochures,” New Direction, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://newdirection.online/publications/brochures>.

⁶⁹ Joseph De Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1847), reprinted in PDF form with a new introduction by Tomasz Poręba MEP and preface by Jacek Kloczkowski (Brussels: New Direction, 2018), <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-JosephDeMaistre.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Henry St. John Bolingbroke, *On Patriotism, Parties, and Idea of a Patriot King*, reprinted in PDF form (Brussels: New Direction, 2020),

Liberal Thinkers, includes biographies of some of the most well-known free-market fundamentalists, such as Ayn Rand, and proponents of the Austrian School of Economics, including Friedrich A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises.⁷¹

Some publications are clearly geared at reactionary culture wars, such as *The Battle for Western Civilisation and the Origins of Western Philosophy* by John Marenbon, or Hannes Gissurarson's *Voices of the Victims: Notes toward a Historiography of Anti-Communist Literature*.⁷²

Ideology

As ECR has been serving as a big tent for various right-wing to far-right political proponents, it has avoided committing itself to a specific ideological line in order to accommodate different internal factions and to prevent trench wars. Instead, by defining itself as center-right, or conservative, it has resorted to keeping its self-classification both defanged and vague, serving the purpose of providing a respectable façade, as well as concealing the more extreme provenance of some of its members—a well-known normalization strategy, particularly offering itself as a model since ECR can take refuge in its less radical past.

Nonetheless, in backroom discussions there is considerable ideological bickering, particularly in those hosted by ND, whose events are usually taking place out of public view. Overall, ideological influences on ECR have been quite diverse from the outset, and as its composition has shifted further to the right over the years, so has the ideological orientation of its constituents, including parties of neofascist and even neo-Nazi provenance.

As ECR emerged from a long-established Conservative block in the European Parliament that has been dominated in its first decades by the “iron lady” Margaret Thatcher, core tenets, such as neoliberal economics, have been part of the ECR's ideological arsenal from the start. Through Thatcher's fostering of an Anglo-American alliance, particularly in the Reagan years, British Conservatives have been influenced by an American brand of right-wing ideology calling itself “fusionism” that still finds proponents among ECR members. The journalist Sean Speer defined fusionism as “the conservative consensus involving free markets, social conservatism, and a hawkish foreign policy ... that provided the intellectual scaffolding for American conservatism essentially from the launch of *National Review* magazine in the mid-1950s to the second term of George W. Bush's presidency.”⁷³

https://newdirection.online/publication/on_patriotism_parties_and_idea_of_a_patriot_king; Juan de Mariana, *Del Rey y la institución real* (Brussels: New Direction, 2021),

https://newdirection.online/publication/del_rey_y_la_institucion_real.

⁷¹ Hannes H. Gissurarson, ed., *Twenty-Four Conservative-Liberal Thinkers*, vol. 2 (Brussels: New Direction, 2020), <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-ThinkersVol2-2020f.pdf>.

⁷² John Marenbon, “The Battle for Western Civilisation and the Origins of Western Philosophy” (Brussels: New Direction, 2018),

https://newdirection.online/publication/the_battle_for_western_civilisation_and_the_origins_of_western_philosophy; Hannes H. Gissurarson, “Voices of the Victims: Notes toward a Historiography of Anti-Communist Literature” (Brussels: New Direction, 2018), https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/VOICES_OF_THE_VICTIMS_NOTES_TOWARDS_A_HISTORIOGRAPHY_OF_ANTI-COMMUNIST_LITERATURE.pdf.

⁷³ Sean Speer, “The Conservative Consensus Is over. The Consequences for the Canadian Right Will Be Profound,” *The Hub*, July 29, 2023, <https://thehub.ca/2023-07-29/sean-speer-the-conservative-consensus-is-over-the-consequences-for-the-canadian-right-will-be-profound/>.

In the academic literature, ECR is generally classified as “soft Eurosceptic,” that is, seeking to reform rather than dissolve the European Union. However, ECR members resist this categorization, and rather self-identify as “Eurorealist”—a term that was made up as a counter-concept to Euroscepticism, and is generally deemed a euphemism for a form of soft Euroscepticism.⁷⁴ The term “Eurorealism” is prominently featured in the ECR’s core statutes, such as the Prague Declaration from 2009 and the statement on “The Future of the European Union” from 2017.⁷⁵ On its website, the ECR Group states still that it “is a centre-right political group in the European Parliament ... with a common cause to reform the EU based on eurorealism, [*sic*] respecting the sovereignty of nations, and focusing on economic recovery, growth and competitiveness.”⁷⁶

According to Martin Steven, quoting a longtime Conservative Party functionary, “no one in the group can remember quite how or why the term ... was thought up, but there was a hope at the time that it sounded neutral.”⁷⁷ He defines Eurorealism as a “specific form of Anglosphere or Atlanticist conservatism” rooted in Thatcherism that mixes “economic liberalism with social traditionalism—and all in the context of as small a state as possible.”⁷⁸ All the while, ECR “tries to keep Eurorealism as non-ideological as possible,” and even “encourages its member parties to adopt different positions at different times, in the spirit of its non-federalist vision of European integration.”⁷⁹ As such, the national delegations of ECR are essentially free to vote on individual issues according to their own judgment. This “broad and pragmatic nature of Eurorealism can paper over the cracks between member parties who are genuinely conservative, and member parties who are, broadly speaking, more in a populist or nationalist tradition,” according to Steven.⁸⁰

National Conservatism

In the recent years, there has been a concerted effort by a growing faction within ECR to self-identify as “national conservative,” regardless of the heterogenous ideological positioning of its member parties.⁸¹ Although the term “national conservatism” has had historic predecessors, in recent years it has undergone a resurgence in extreme right-wing circles.⁸² Among those figures behind the revival of the term is Yoram Hazony, who has appeared at several ECR- and ND-related events, and whose Edmund Burke Foundation is behind the flagship National Conservatism Conference (NatCon), a

⁷⁴ Martin Steven, “‘Euro-Realism’ in the 2014 European Parliament Elections: The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Democratic Deficit,” *Representation* 52, no. 1 (January, 2016): 1–12.

⁷⁵ “The Future of the European Union: ECR Statement,” ECR Group, March 8, 2017, https://ecrgroup.eu/publication/the_future_of_the_european_union_ecr_statement.

⁷⁶ “Who we are,” ECR Group, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://ecrgroup.eu/ecr>.

⁷⁷ Martin H. M. Steven, *The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR): Politics, Parties and Policies* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020), 44.

⁷⁸ Steven, *The European Conservatives and Reformists*, 42–43.

⁷⁹ Steven, *The European Conservatives and Reformists*, 44–45.

⁸⁰ Steven, *The European Conservatives and Reformists*, 46.

⁸¹ An article in *The Economist* argues that the spreading of the terminology follows an “orchestrated rather than organic” strategy, which, however “At the level of pure political power ... has been doing extraordinarily well.” See “‘National Conservatives’ Are Forging a Global Front against Liberalism,” *The Economist*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2024/02/15/national-conservatives-are-forging-a-global-front-against-liberalism>.

⁸² “Google Trends: National Conservatism,” Google Trends, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=National%20Conservatism&hl=en-US>.

close partner of ND.⁸³ A former speechwriter for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and founding president of the Zionist Herzl Institute, Hazony has been dubbed the “founder of the National Conservative movement.”⁸⁴

Despite being a self-designation, today the ECR is often identified as national conservative by mainstream media and political scientists, without putting much thought into the provenance or meaning of the term, which does not do justice to the realities of the ECR serving as a catch basin that also includes extreme right-wing constituents. One may recall that parties such as the Sweden Democrats with their neo-Nazi roots, or Fratelli d’Italia with their neofascist heritage, are members of ECR.⁸⁵ Just recently, an undercover journalist has filmed the overt neofascism in the leadership ranks of FdI, who had built his credits as contributor to the far-right think tank Nazione Futura—a fixed member of ND’s Working Group on European Conservatism. In the undercover investigation, ECR Vice President Nicola Procaccini (born 1976), Giorgia Meloni’s right-hand man, was taped mingling with young neofascists of FdI’s youth group performing the gladiator greeting (Italian: *saluto gladiatorio*), a handshake adopted by the Italian far right in the recent years.⁸⁶

At the heart of the national conservatism project is the rehabilitation of the term “nationalism” as such—as Yoram Hazony is ready to admit in his *Virtue of Nationalism*—and to establish national conservatism as a right-wing brand trying (but failing) to delimit itself from neoconservatism to the left and from ultranationalism to the right.⁸⁷ During a recent NatCon conference in Brussels from April 16–17, 2024, the event’s Twitter account posted a quote by Anna Wellisz, vice chair of NatCon: “National Conservatism is a tautology. We use the phrase, nonetheless, because it’s worth remembering that conservatism is about a place. What’s worth conserving is, simply, a home. That’s the hill to die on.”⁸⁸ A Hungarian participant, Zsófia Tóth-Bíró, a research fellow at the Danube

⁸³ “Yoram Hazony Rediscovered Conservatism,” Hoover Institution, Stanford University, June 22, 2022, <https://www.hoover.org/research/yoram-hazony-rediscovered-conservatism>; “Prof. Yoram Hazony: National Conservatism,” New Direction, December 15, 2020, https://newdirection.online/rediscovering-conservatism/webcast/episode_05_national_conservatism; “Why Borders Matter: Yoram Hazony,” Tankesmedjan Oikos on YouTube, January 31, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVvQl6mKHnM>.

⁸⁴ Suzanne Schneider, “Light among the Nations,” *Jewish Currents*, September 28, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/light-among-the-nations>.

⁸⁵ Ishaan Tharoor, “Sweden’s Election Marks a New Far-Right Surge in Europe,” *Washington Post*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/16/sweden-election-far-right-democrats/>; Alessia Donà, “The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: The Case of Fratelli d’Italia,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27, no. 5 (October 2022): 775–794.

⁸⁶ Luca Pons, “Procaccini (FdI) nega di aver fatto il saluto gladiatorio: ‘Eravamo vicini e mi hanno preso il gomito,’” *Fanpage*, June 15, 2024, <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/procaccini-fdi-nega-di-aver-fatto-il-saluto-gladiatorio-eravamo-vicini-e-mi-hanno-preso-il-gomito/>; “Saluti romani, inni al Duce e ‘Sieg Heil’: Dentro Gioventù nazionale, il movimento giovanile di Fratelli d’Italia,” *Fanpage*, June 13, 2024, <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/saluti-romani-inni-al-duce-e-sieg-heil-dentro-gioventu-nazionale-il-movimento-giovanile-di-fratelli-ditalia/>.

⁸⁷ Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Brenden Gallagher, “The National Conservatism Movement Just Began—Does It Have a Future?,” *The Daily Dot*, August 11, 2019, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/national-conservatism/>.

⁸⁸ National Conservatism, X account, April 17, 2024, <https://x.com/NatConTalk/status/1780632914239078728>.

Institute, stated: “Nationalism is not about wanting to oppress or defeat other nations, but putting your own nation first.”⁸⁹

One of the core issues that divides the national conservative and neoconservative camps concerns the latter’s alleged globalist (that is, anti-nationalist) policies, as well as the order of imperatives, whereby the natcons blame the neocons for putting libertarianism, not national culture, first. Particularly, free-market policies are frequently challenged with the argument that open borders and the free movement of people and goods are destroying national wealth and cohesion.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, many NatCon guests stand out for their defense of freewheeling capitalism, including the US billionaire Peter Thiel, a frequent guest and sponsor of the conference, known for his support of the Trump campaign.⁹¹

By taking issue with some of the implications of classic libertarianism, the national conservative line clashes with some of the historic core statutes of the parent ECR Party, such as its foundational document, the Reykjavík Declaration, adopted in May 2013, which states that it “brings together parties committed to individual liberty, national sovereignty, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, private property, low taxes, sound money, free trade, open competition, and the devolution of power.”⁹²

Also, its distancing from the far right and white nationalism on the part of the national-conservative camp seems only cosmetic. An argument often brought up by national conservatives is that nationalism would not be based on race, but on cultural affiliation with a nation.⁹³ However, listening to some of the NatCon speakers, it becomes evident that racism is baked into the rhetoric in many cases. A professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Amy Wax, stated during the first iteration of NatCon in 2019: “Europe and the first world, to which the United States belongs, remain mostly white for now, and the third world, although mixed, contains a lot of nonwhite people. In effect, this means taking the position that the country will be better off with more whites and fewer nonwhites.”⁹⁴ The conference organizer, Yoram Hazony, came to her defense.⁹⁵ Thiel protégé (and later US Senator as well as Trump running mate) J. D. Vance brought up the Great Replacement conspiracy theory by stating: “the most important way to measure a healthy society is whether the American nation is having enough children to replace itself.”⁹⁶ And during the 2024 Brussels NatCon, Florence Bergeau-

⁸⁹ National Conservatism, X account, April 16, 2024, <https://x.com/NatConTalk/status/1780217448853082386>.

⁹⁰ For example, see the debate on “Libertarianism vs National Conservatism” between Yaron Brook (Chairman, Ayn Rand Institute) and James Orr (Chairman UK, Edmund Burke Foundation), organized by New Direction: “Think Tank Central: Defending Freedom Conference, 21 September 2023,” New Direction YouTube channel, October 5, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdDutQA2qMQ>.

⁹¹ James Pogue, “Inside the New Right, Where Peter Thiel Is Placing His Biggest Bets,” *Vanity Fair*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>.

⁹² “ECR Party: Statutes,” European Conservatives and Reformists Party website, 2022, <https://appf.europa.eu/cmsdata/261555/ECR%20PARTY%20STATUTES%202022.pdf>.

⁹³ Jennifer Schuessler, “Polishing the Nationalist Brand in the Trump Era,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/19/arts/trump-nationalism-tucker-carlson.html>.

⁹⁴ Gallagher, “The National Conservatism Movement Just Began.”

⁹⁵ Rod Dreher, “Was Amy Wax’s Speech Racist?” *American Conservative*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/was-amy-wax-speech-racist-immigration/>.

⁹⁶ Gallagher, “The National Conservatism Movement Just Began.”

Blacker went as far as saying, “The fight against ‘Islamophobia and racism’ is nothing more than a comprehensive re-education program.”⁹⁷

Conclusion

While much attention has been paid to the ECR Group and, to a lesser extent, the ECR Party, the activities of its think tank, New Direction, have been hitherto largely neglected. This is despite its being an important hub for meetings with affiliates and sponsors, ranging from private industry to lobby groups to right-wing and libertarian think tanks and organizations, which have a considerable influence on ECR politics. ND also serves as a platform for fundamental ideological debate that demonstrates the radicalization process of ECR as a whole, which, for political purposes, keeps its ideological line deliberately vague and attenuated, in an effort to appeal to voters and forge strategic alliances in the EU Parliament.

Although outwardly ECR is not inclined to put ideology first, as it intends to serve as a big tent for proponents of various right-wing to far-right political currents, there are nonetheless heated ideological backroom discussions happening, particularly at ND events, whereby ECR’s more moderate right-wing libertarians are increasingly under fire from the right, particularly by the national conservative faction. As the ECR is currently on a rapprochement course with more moderate factions in the European Parliament, such as the European People’s Party, the growing threat emanating from ECR as an entity with an increasingly extreme right-wing agenda should be a cause of concern to the wider public.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ National Conservatism, X account, April 17, 2024, <https://x.com/NatConTalk/status/1780616306011578871>.

⁹⁸ Eddy Wax et al., “EU Parliament Centrists Circle Wagons to Keep Far Right out of Top Jobs,” Politico, July 9, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-parliament-centrist-circle-wagon-stop-far-right-getting-top-job-jordan-bardella-giorgia-meloni-epp/>.