

# Europe's post-2008 political fragmentation is being tested

Blog post by Anikó Zsebik, Alessandro Gangarossa and Maarten Lemstra, 21 January 2021

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The emergence of fragmented political landscapes has been an increasingly shared phenomena in European capitals in the past decade. The financial crisis was a profound shock for many European traditional centre-left and centre-right parties, which were dropped by the electorates both for their handling of the crisis and its aftermath. In their wake, smaller, often less moderate parties, emerged on both the left and right. The resulting coalition governments, often including junior partners with marginal support or less-than-mainstream views, have struggled with this set-up. The last fortnight has been a reminder of this growing weakness in the European political system with three European countries suddenly succumbing to coalition collapses.

In Italy, in the latest in a series of political crisis, the second cabinet led by prime minister Giuseppe Conte came to an end on January 13th as a result of disagreements over the use of resources from the EU's recovery fund. In Estonia, even though the resignation of prime minister Jüri Ratas on January 13th was triggered by the launch of a corruption investigation against members of his Centre Party, the true reason seems to be apparent tensions in his centre-right coalition with the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) and the Christian-democratic Fatherland party (Isamaa). In the Netherlands, pressure on the government of Mark Rutte came to a boiling point after an enquiry by the Dutch parliament resulted in a condemnation that fundamental principles of the rule of law were violated when several families were falsely treated as tax fraudsters.

At face value, these three government collapses seem very different, and they are. Italy's politics have been dysfunctional for decades and Conte was just the latest leader to be saddled by structural fragmentation in parliament bounding him with the task of running a fragile and ego-driven coalition. In Estonia, domestic and EU-level concerns over ideology and policy in the government, for example about a controversial referendum on the definition of marriage, convinced the two largest parties to overcome their differences and join up forces. In the Netherlands, the prime minister attempted to manage the pent-up frustration in his own coalition by choosing to resign over a scandal, rather than be ousted by a no-confidence vote, and thereby minimize adverse impact on the upcoming March elections.

Nevertheless, the overarching theme is that they reflect a landscape that has been emerging since 2008 in European politics, in which stable coalitions and cabinets serving their full term are increasingly an exception rather than the rule. These multi-party coalitions can be ideologically and politically strained and tend to be weak to start with. Losing a coalition partner or lacking the resilience to weather even minor storms can spell the end of a government. The covid-19 pandemic further aggravated the situation by leaving limited room for manoeuvre to deal with policy divisions

and heightening the pressure for competent management from coalitions with limited capacity to deliver it.

Governments in Bulgaria and Czechia are facing similar challenges at upcoming elections. But two of the EU's most important coalitions are also entering into critical periods. The German coalition government continues to be squeezed from both sides, which is in part what makes the question of Merkel's successor so important, because it is the question of whether he can finally buck this European trend in 2021 and return Germany to a majority single party CDU/CSU government (answer: probably not). In France, Macron's uneasy coalition - of followers rather than parties - has already frayed badly over the last two years and could potentially become one more victim of drift to vulnerable governments of the last ten years when it faces the voters again in 2022.