

Study
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European political parties

poorly identified political
bodies?

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Foreword

European political parties play a little-known role of influence on national decision-makers and in selecting the candidates for the presidencies of the EU's main institutions.

Ahead of the 2024 European elections, the Jacques Delors Institute's Political Observatory of the European Parliament¹ asked Nathalie Brack, Associate Professor at the Université libre de Bruxelles, and Wouter Wolfs, Lecturer at KU Leuven, to analyse the development of these parties, their funding, their status and the current importance of these political bodies that remain poorly identified.

Unprecedented in the scope of the subject matter, this study, which reflects the views of the authors alone, was supplemented by the contributions of several members of our working group.

Following papers on the Spitzenkandidaten system and transnational lists, it is the third in a series devoted to major European institutional challenges².

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-
- 1 The Political Observatory of the European Parliament is a working group of the Jacques Delors Institute created in 2019 and is made up of Pervenche Berès, Jean-Louis Bourlanges, Thierry Chopin, Monica Frassoni, Daniel Freund, Fabienne Keller, Alain Lamassoure, Pascal Lamy (president), Sébastien Maillard, Javier Moreno Sanchez, Geneviève Pons (Europe Jacques Delors) and Christine Verger (rapporteur).
 - 2 See: Political Observatory of the European Parliament, Costa O. & Thinus P. 2022. "Spitzenkandidaten : oui ou non ?" Special issue, Paris: Jacques Delors Institute, 1 June (in French), C. Verger 2022. "A move towards transnational lists in 2024?", Policy Paper N° 279, Paris: Jacques Delors Institute, 14 June

Executive summary

Political parties play a central role in contemporary liberal democracies: they are essential conduits between citizens and political decision-making and candidate selection. Given their role at the national level, it is not surprising that political parties have been turned to as a solution to the democratic deficit in the European Union (EU).

This study aims to explore the different facets of European political parties, the challenges they face and the prospects for the role of European political parties for supranational democracy. It is structured in four parts.

The first part will briefly trace the evolution of European political parties. It shows that the creation of a regulatory framework has favoured the emergence of Europarties. After a period of rapid emergence and great volatility, their number seems to have stabilised in the recent period, with **10 European political parties recognised** by the Authority for European Political Parties and Foundations (APPF).

The second part analyses the financing of European parties. Introduced in 2003, the direct funding of political parties has been modified in 2007, 2014, 2018, 2019 and is currently being modified. We show that while European political parties have been able to rely on an increasing level of financial resources, not least due to the increase in public funding, the use of these subsidies is also subject to certain limitations. The most important is that **European funds cannot be used to directly or indirectly finance national political parties or candidates**, nor for national election or referendum campaigns. Although far from being their only obstacle, the rules surrounding the use of European funds are one of the constraints limiting the involvement and visibility of European political parties in political life.

A third part addresses the question of the role and nature of Europarties. It focuses in particular on three essential functions of parties in a democracy: the articulation and aggregation of interests, the function of linkage and the influence on the decision-making process. It analyses the **low visibility of Europarties** in elections; **the contribution of the Spitzenkandidaten** procedure; the structure and rules of membership of European political parties; and finally, the question of the influence of Europarties via the Parliament, the Council and the European Council.

The conclusion looks at the main constraints on European political parties and discusses the prospects for the next European elections of 2024 and 2029. In particular, beyond the progress on **transnational lists** and **Spitzekandidaten**, the visibility of the Europarties could be easily and quickly increased through the inclusion of their logo in the campaign material of their member parties.

Introduction

Political parties play a central role in contemporary liberal democracies: they are essential conduits between citizens and political decision-making and candidate selection. Given their role at the national level, it is not surprising that political parties have been turned to as a solution to the democratic deficit in the European Union (EU). One of the factors behind this democratic deficit is related to the perceived distance between European decision-makers and voters (Follesdal and Hix 2006). (European) political parties are therefore considered to be potential bridge-makers between voters and political decision-makers (Wolkenstein 2019). As highlighted in a recent report from the European Parliament (EP), political parties are seen to be “essential for the development of a truly EU public sphere” and should “play a more central role in the European elections process and contribute to forming EU political awareness and expressing the will of EU citizens” (Wieland and Goerens report, 2021/2018(INI)).

In their current form, European political parties are the fruit of a long-term process. From the end of World War II, transnational cooperation between parties was gradually established in an informal manner. The 1970s and the prospect of the first European elections by universal suffrage triggered a process of institutionalising these transnational relations with the first European party federations and confederations. The Maastricht Treaty subsequently recognised the importance of European parties for the functioning of democracy on a supranational level, while Regulation 2004/2003 “on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding” recognised an official status for political parties at European level and also introduced long-term public funding for their activities.

Today, European parties are consolidated and enjoy both legal recognition and long-term funding. This does not mean, however, that they are any less the central point of a paradox: they play an increasingly important role, particularly in the coordination of their members and the preparation of European Council and the Council of the European Union, while remaining broadly invisible to most European citizens and failing to act as the hoped-for bridge between citizens and European policymakers. Their nature and roles are still developing and are the subject of much debate.

This study aims to consider the various aspects of European political parties, the challenges they face and the outlook regarding their role in ensuring democracy on a supranational level. It is based on scientific literature, the authors’ research and interviews conducted in September

and October 2022 with former presidents, MEPs and secretary-generals of European political parties and of political groups of the European Parliament³. It is broken down into four sections. The first part will briefly trace the evolution of European political parties. Then, we will analyse their funding (section 2) and their nature and role (section 3). Lastly, the conclusion will discuss the outlook ahead of the 2024 European elections.

3 In keeping with the overall consistency of the study and the use of interviews, the identity of the persons interviewed has been systematically anonymised.

1.

The development of
European political parties

I • The emergence of European political parties

European political parties, or Europarties, have existed for around half a century. The first European parties were founded in the 1970s ahead of the first direct elections of the European Parliament. The Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community was created in 1973 while the European People's Party (EPP) and the Federation of Liberal and Democrat Parties in Europe were established in 1976. These new organisations were basically used as platforms for national parties sharing an ideological affinity to coordinate their campaigns for the European elections.

Cross-border cooperation initiatives of this kind along ideological lines were actually not new. European political parties could draw on the experience of party “Internationals”. In the aftermath of World War II, Internationals were founded by the liberal parties (in 1947), the socialist parties (in 1951) and Christian-democrat parties (in 1961). The main aim of these organisations was to provide a network for sharing support and ideas (Van Hecke et al, 2018, 39-43). Similarly, while the members of the European Coal and Steel Community's Common Assembly initially took their places in alphabetical order, they quickly formed political groups with strong ideological affinities. The new European political parties were therefore able to draw on a long tradition of cross-border cooperation between parties.

The 1979 European elections also encouraged other party families to step up their collaboration. Several green parties in Europe coordinated their election manifestos during the 1979 campaign, which ultimately resulted in a structural arrangement between green and radical parties in 1980: the Coordination of European Green and Radical Parties (CGRP). Due to internal divisions, the organisation was dissolved in 1982 but one year later the Coordination of European Green parties was founded, this time made up only of green parties (Dietz, 2000, 200-202). Similarly, De Winter and Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro (2002, 493) highlight that the first European elections were crucial to the constitution of a group of regionalists on a European level: “before 1979, international relations were practically non-existent”. In 1981, the European Free Alliance was founded.

II • Recognition under the Maastricht Treaty

The Maastricht Treaty was a symbolic milestone in the development of European political parties. For the first time, they received “constitutional recognition”. Article 138a of the Treaty provides that “political parties at European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union”. This specific reference in the Treaty’s text also had an effect on the organisation of European political parties.

Several Europarties thereafter changed their name to include the term “party”, and even changed their internal structures in a bid to present as a more centralised and stronger transnational organisation. The Confederation of Socialist Parties became the Party of European Socialists (PES) in 1992 and the European Socialist Party in 1994. This change is viewed by party leaders as “a definitive step in the development of a real European socialist party” (Lightfoot 2005, 1). The PES also adopted a set of political goals, introduced a new decision-making body, the “Leaders’ Conference”, and established qualified majority voting for the adoption of decisions (Hix and Lord, 1997, 172-173). One year later, the Federation of Liberal and Democrat Parties in Europe developed into the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR party). The Euro-party also expanded its commitment to its programme, and adopted a more complex internal organisation including the official institution of a party leaders meeting (Hix and Lord, 1997, 175-176).

In 1993, the Greens changed their “Coordination” into the European Federation of Green Parties (EFGP). In terms of structure, this federation was characterised by closer cooperation, such as the introduction of majority voting in internal decision-making processes, a stronger wording of common policy and a more proportional representation of member parties (Dietz, 2000, 202-204). In 1995, the European Free Alliance renamed itself “Democratic Party of the Peoples of Europe – European Free Alliance” (DPPE-EFA). The European People’s Party had already used the “party” label since its creation in 1976, although at the time this was more of an ambition than a reality, as demonstrated by the added sub-title “Federation of Christian- Democratic Parties of the European Community” (Jansen and Van Hecke 2011, 40-42).

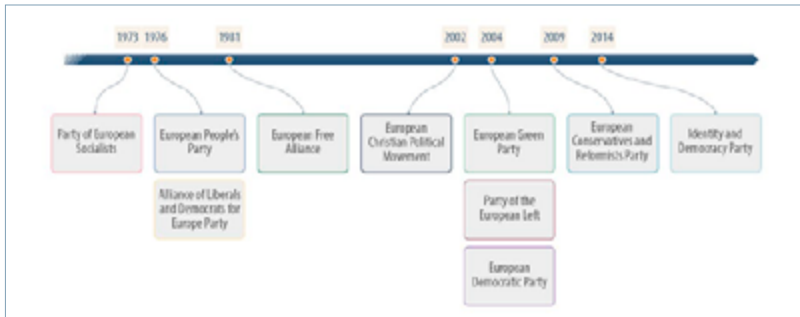
III • The introduction of a regulatory framework and an increased number of European political parties

Following a long and difficult process, the direct public funding of European political parties was introduced in 2003, in addition to a set of rules governing the use of these resources (Wolfs, 2022, 23-38). The availability of European subsidies had a galvanising effect, both on the scope of the European political parties and their internal organisation. The number of Europarties increased considerably, from five to no fewer than sixteen in 2017.

Ahead of the availability of European funding, the five original parties were joined by three new arrivals. The Alliance for Europe of the Nations had been founded in 2002 to complement the existing Union for Europe of the Nations group in the European Parliament and was made up of conservative and Eurosceptic parties. The availability of funding was the main reason behind the creation of such an extra-parliamentary organisation (Benedetto 2008, 138-139). Similarly, it was also a decisive factor in bringing together parties of the radical left under the banner of a European party. Following years of discussions, the incentive of public subsidies resulted in the creation of the Party of the European Left in 2004 (Dunphy and March, 2013, 523-524).

The same year, the European Democratic Party was created, under the initiative of François Bayrou and Romano Prodi, who had left the EPP due to discontent over its ideological and strategic choices. Although they were part of the liberal group in the European Parliament, they did not join the ELDR and instead created a separate Europarty (Smith, 2014). They wanted to avoid the “liberal” label, which had very strong economic connotations in France, and presented themselves as a more progressive alternative. EU funding of parties facilitated this move (Hanley, 2008).

Timeline. Creation of the European political parties



▲ Source: European Parliamentary Research Service, EPRS

The number of European political parties continued to rise in the following years, reaching its peak at sixteen in 2017. Almost all of the newly created parties were formed from collaborations between Eurosceptic parties and politicians, often in a bid to obtain maximum funding from the EU (Wolfs, 2022, 138-157). At the same time, this rapid emergence of European parties over these last two decades brought with it greater volatility: out of the fifteen Europarties created between 2004 and 2017, ten had already lost their access to European funding and/or were dissolved in 2018. Some were investigated following improper use of funds, while others no longer complied with the minimum requirements after the criteria for parties' recognition and the registration procedure were tightened (Wolfs, 2022, 241-243).⁴ In 2022, ten European political parties were recognised by the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (APPF):

1. The European People's Party (EPP)
2. The Party of European Socialists (PES)
3. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)
4. The European Democratic Party (EDP)
5. The European Green Party (EGP)
6. The European Free Alliance (EFA)
7. The Identity and Democracy Party (ID Party)

⁴ The list of parties and foundations removed from the register by the APFF can be accessed here : <https://www.appf.europa.eu/appf/en/parties-and-foundations/removed-from-the-register>

8. The European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR)
9. The Party of the European Left (PEL)
10. The European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)

In 2007, separate funding was introduced for European political foundations with a structure like similar institutions that already existed on a national level. The German “Stiftungen” in particular were a source of inspiration. The following year, all the Europarties gradually created their own foundations. While they differ in terms of organisation, activities and functions, the main role of these eurofoundations is to contribute to political and ideological debate on an EU level and to act as civic education organisations geared towards strengthening European democracy (Dakowska, 2009; Gagatsek and Van Hecke, 2014). They regularly organise events, seminars and training courses and frequently publish studies on key issues for the political party to which they are affiliated.

Table 1. European political foundations and their corresponding Europarty

Foundation	Party	
Wilfried Martens Center for European Studies	EPP	https://www.martenscentre.eu/
Foundation for European Progressive Studies	PES	https://feps-europe.eu
European Liberal Forum	ALDE	https://liberalforum.eu/
Institute of European Democrats	EDP	https://www.iedonline.eu/
Green European Foundation	EGP	https://gef.eu/
Sallux	ECPM	https://sallux.eu/
New Direction	ECR	https://newdirection.online
Coppieters Foundation	EFA	https://www.ideasforeurope.eu
Transform Europe	PEL	https://www.transform-network.net
Identity & Democracy Foundation	ID Party	https://www.id-foundation.eu/

▲ Source: APFF, <https://www.appf.europa.eu/appf/en/parties-and-foundations/registered-foundations>

2.

The funding of European
political parties

Following a long and arduous process, direct funding of European political parties was finally introduced in 2003, together with a set of rules governing eligibility for funding, income and expenditure, and transparency and oversight. This regulatory framework was then amended in 2007, 2014, 2018 and 2019. The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers are currently debating the latest revisions of the funding rules. The introduction of these subsidies for Europarties is based on the idea that European political parties are an important means to promote democracy on a European level and only financial support would enable them to fulfil their democratic role (Wolfs, 2022; Wolfs and Smulders, 2018).

Since 2017, a two-step procedure has been in place to obtain access to European funding. Firstly, a European political party must be registered with the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (see box below). To be registered with the Authority, a European political party must meet a certain number of conditions (table 2). Firstly, they must have a seat in an EU Member State. Prior to the introduction of a separate European legal personality, European parties (and foundations) were also obliged to acquire a legal personality in the Member State where their seat was located. Now, all registered parties are also granted a European legal personality. Secondly, a European political party cannot operate for profit.

Box 1. The Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations

The APPF is an independent body of the EU with its own legal personality, but which is physically situated in the European Parliament. To ensure its independence, the Director of the Authority is appointed jointly by the three main EU institutions – the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the European Commission – for a non-renewable five-year term. The Director may not have an electoral mandate or be a former employee of a European political party or foundation. One of the main duties of the new Authority is to decide on the registration of Europarties and foundations, checking that they meet the registration criteria and provisions in terms of the governance of funding rules.

The third condition is that they must respect the EU's founding values, as expressed in article 2 of the TEU, "of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". However, a standard statement signed by the party's president is sufficient to meet this condition. The Authority does not conduct an in-depth assessment to ascertain whether the party complies with these founding values. The funding rules also include an ex-post procedure to check whether a European party does not respect the EU's fundamental values, but past experience shows that the scope of this procedure is too narrow, it is too complex and it is difficult to ensure compliance (see for example Wolfs, 2022, 215-221).

Fourthly, to be registered as a European political party, the party (or its party members) must have taken part in European Parliament elections, or – in the case of newly created parties, must have publicly expressed an intention to do so. In practical terms, the signature of a statement of intent is sufficient.

The fifth condition concerns the geographical representation of the European political party and is by far the most exacting. A party must be represented in at least one quarter of Member States by Members of the European Parliament, national parliaments or regional parliaments, or must have received at least three percent of the votes cast in one quarter of Member States in the most recent elections to the European Parliament. This condition was the most difficult to meet for many European parties. It is the main reason why most European political parties have lost their European funding or were not deemed eligible for registration.

In 2018, this condition was further tightened to include the provision that a European party may only be represented by member parties. Prior to this amendment, individual politicians could also act as representatives of the Europarty. While this amendment of the rules was primarily aimed at preventing the creation of "phantom parties" that only exist on paper, the new provisions have structured the Europarties into umbrella organisations grouping together national member parties.

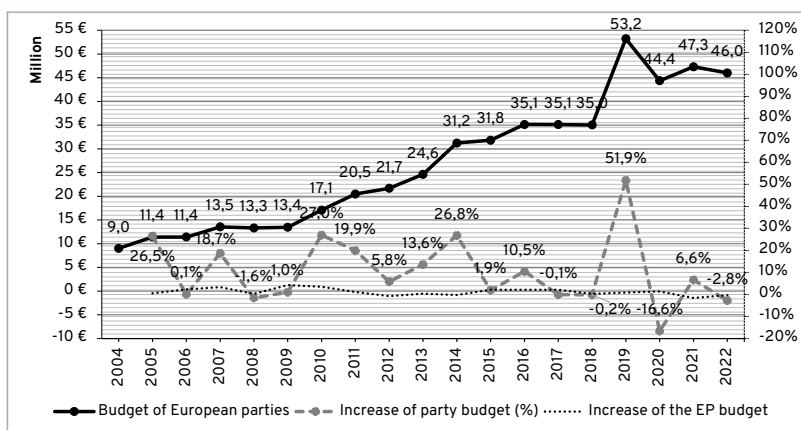
Table 2. Eligibility requirements

2003	2007	2014	2018	2019
Legal personality and seat in an EU Member State	<i>unchanged</i>	seat in an EU Member State (introduction of a European legal personality)	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i>
Respect of fundamental European values	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i> (direct reference to article 2 of the TEU)	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i>
Participation in the European Parliament elections	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i>
Representation in one quarter of Member States	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i>	Representation exclusively by member parties	<i>unchanged</i>
			Member parties are not members of another European political party	<i>unchanged</i>
		Must not pursue profit goals	<i>unchanged</i>	<i>unchanged</i>

Once registered with the Authority, all European political parties and foundations may submit an application for European funding. The only additional condition for the granting of funding is that the European political party must be represented by at least one Member of the European Parliament. Given the threshold of representation in at least one quarter of Member States, this condition is satisfied without difficulty by all Europarties.

The budget is then allocated in two phases, reflecting the distribution of funding to political groups within the EP. First of all, a total amount is included in the EP budget and is considerably increased over time (graph 1). In 2004, i.e. the first year of funding, around €9 million were allocated to European political parties. In 2019, this amount had risen to €53 million.

Graph 1. Budget of European political parties



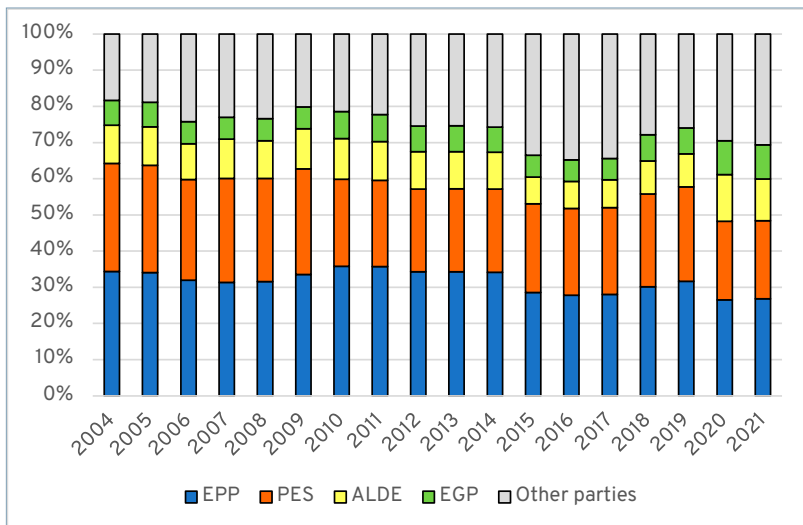
▲ Source: Nathalie Brack, Wouter Wolfs. Note: these figures take inflation into account, prices of January 2022.

Secondly, the total funding is split between eligible Europarties. A large share of funding – 90% – is distributed proportionately: the amount a party receives is decided by the number of affiliated MEPs. The remaining 10% of funding is allocated in equal amounts to all Europarties. This distribution system therefore clearly benefits the major parties.

Graph 2 shows the shares of the total amount of funding allocated to the EPP, the PES, ALDE, EGP and the other European political parties.

In relative terms the four main European political parties lost ground between 2004 and 2017: their share fell from over 80% to around 65%. This is due to a loss of seats at the European Parliament and an increase in the number of Europarties, resulting in a decrease in their proportional amounts and in the share allocated in equal amounts. In 2018-2019, their shares rose once again as the number of registered Europarties fell significantly and the subsidy distribution rules were amended to benefit the largest Europarties (only 10% – compared to 15% previously – was allocated in equal amounts). In absolute terms, with the exception of 2015, the four main parties enjoyed a steady increase in their total subsidy amounts.

Graph 2. Total funding amounts for the four main European political parties



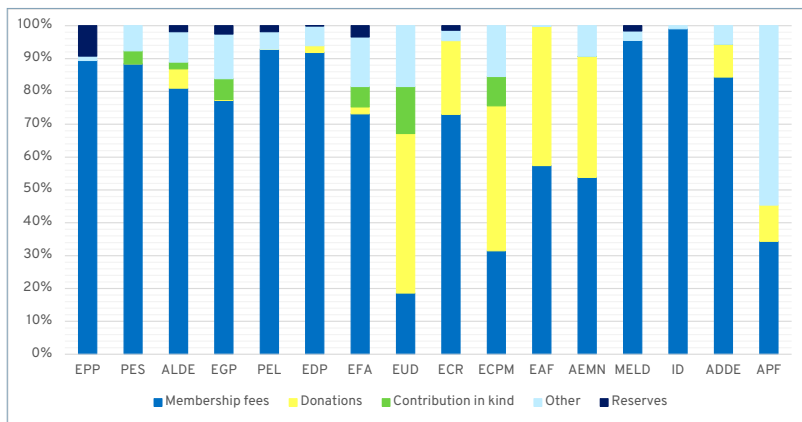
▲ Source: Nathalie Brack, Wouter Wolfs

These European subsidies cannot be the only source of financing for European political parties. Currently, European subsidies can account for a maximum of 90% of a Europarty’s total budget, meaning that they must find at least 10% from other sources (such as membership fees or donations) to supplement their funding. In the past, this ceiling was lower. Before 2019, it was a maximum of 85% and before 2008, a

maximum of 75% of the party’s total revenue could come from European funding. This ceiling was raised because most Europarties were experiencing greater difficulties in finding sufficient own revenue to supplement the subsidies.

European subsidies have always been very important for European political parties to exist. On average, European subsidies made up between 73% and 85% of European political parties’ total revenue for the period between 2004 and 2020. In terms of Europarties’ own resources, the prevalent source of income for most parties is membership fees: for eleven of the sixteen parties, these fees accounted for at least two thirds of their total budget (graph 3). Most of them rely on the fees paid by member parties. Even for ALDE, the only Europarty to have established a relatively large individual membership base, fees from individual members are limited. A small number of parties rely heavily on donations: this is the case of the ECPM, the ECR or the former “Europeans United for Democracy” party (EUD), which was dissolved in 2017.

Graph 3. Average sources of European political parties’ own resources



▲ Source: Nathalie Brack, Wouter Wolfs

European political parties have been able to enjoy a growing level of financial resources, particularly due to an increase in public funding. However, the use of these subsidies is also subject to certain restrictions. The main condition is that European funding may not be used to directly or indirectly fund national political parties or candidates for election campaigns or national referendums. In this respect, the term

“direct funding” is interpreted in very broad strokes by the Authority, as the body responsible for Europarty oversight. Even the funding of training courses for national politicians is prohibited.

The restrictions concerning the use of European funding therefore limit the involvement and visibility of European political parties in political life. This is not the only barrier, however. Ongoing discussions concerning a revision of the regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties must find a way to increase their visibility and how often they hold events by reducing the co-financing rate (to 5%, and even 0% during the European election period), although this amendment would also weaken their (financial) ties with society. The EP 2021/2018 (INI) own-initiative procedure report also calls for the option of creating other types of resources and a lifting of the ban on financing referendum campaigns on issues related to the EU Treaties.

3.

The nature, role and
organisation of European
political parties

European political parties did not emerge and develop as a result of pressure from society. Unlike national parties, Europarties were created and consolidated following a top-down process aimed at correcting the EU's democratic deficit. Given the key role of parties in representative democracies, European parties were seen as a natural step towards a European political union, in which parties would act as conduits between citizens and European decision-makers and would help to create a European public space. The EU has not (yet) shifted from a "Europe of patriotism to a Europe of parties" (Marquand 1978) and European political parties are still facing many challenges and limitations (Jadot and Kelbel 2017, Klüver and Rodon 2013). As their nature and roles are evolving, they are the subject of much discussion in scientific literature, with some referring to confederations or umbrella organisations and even "parties of parties" (Bressanelli 2022, Johansson 2009). In this section we will consider the three key roles of parties in a democracy: the function of articulating and aggregating interests, the function of ties and the function of influence over the decision-making process.

I • The role of European political parties in European elections

I A COMMON PROGRAMME BUT A LOW PROFILE

Despite the institutionalisation and consolidation of European political parties, they are still the central point of a paradox: they play a key role in coordination and socialisation, and even of making their members more European within the European institutions and beyond, but remain at a remove from citizens as they are poorly visible and little-known. Only a handful of Member States, for example, included the names and/or logos of European political parties on the ballot papers for the 2019 election (Auel and Tiemann 2020, 74-79).

Traditionally, one of the key functions of political parties in a democracy is the formulation of objectives, mainly through the election programme that they will implement if they are successful. The European institutional framework does not allow European political parties to take up a full role in this way. The European elections, while becoming increasingly Europeanised and political, remain national votes: even though efforts have been made concerning programmes and the leaders of sister parties are invited (interview with Pervenche Berès),

national parties remain the main stakeholders in the composition of lists and electoral campaigns. Voters are generally unmoved by the stakes which often remain limited to national issues. In addition, as highlighted by C. Kelbel and C. Jadot (2017: 64), “the European political system itself, since it does not rely on the responsibility of a unified executive vis-à-vis the legislature, weakens the existence of Europarties outside elections time. In sum, not only are Europarties’ proposals unfollowed at the time of elections, they further lack purpose between elections. These deficiencies logically cast doubt on the relevance of European political programmes as the production of Europarties.”

As a result, Europarties’ election manifestos do not fulfil exactly the same traditional roles as the electoral programmes of political parties. However, they summarise the political priorities of the political family in question and are essential for European political parties. Moreover, recent research has shown that the election pledges made by European political parties during the elections of the EP did have an impact as they were considered in the European Commission’s programme of work, particularly as regards the EPP and ALDE, but also the EGP and to a lesser extent the PES (Kostadinova and Giurcanu 2018, 2020). The main parties have started to leverage this situation, placing a focus on a few key priorities that will be subsequently used as a basis when negotiating the European Commission’s programme of work. Renew intends to focus its campaign on a few main ideas that unite its members and which will be used in the negotiations for the formation of coalitions and for the vote on the presidency of the Commission (interview Renew, video-conference, 11 November 2022).

The fact remains that European political parties devote much of their time and resources to drafting their programme ahead of the European elections. The PES adopted a text at its 2022 Congress which will be used as the basis extracted from a limited programme ahead of the 2024 elections. Similarly, the EPP adopted fourteen resolutions and a manifesto highlighting its vision for Europe during its 2022 Congress in Rotterdam. The EGP also launched a programme co-drafting process in late 2022 in a bid to harmonise the positions of its members for the European elections. While this process tended to create divisions within European parties, it claims to be based more on consensus. It does, however, result in a coordination text that reflects the lowest common denominator (Hanley 2015).

Despite these efforts, European political parties and their programmes still suffer from a low profile around the European elections. While Euro-

pean affairs are becoming more politicised and emphasis is increasingly placed on supranational challenges, a national approach remains predominant and communications during election campaigns are still largely dominated by national parties. Europarties do not have the material and financial resources to organise pan-European campaigns (Hertner 2011) and national rules prevent strong relations between national parties and European parties of the same political family. In ten Member States, parties cannot accept contributions, of campaign equipment or resources, from the European party during elections (Anglmayer 2021). Above all, national parties do not often put forward their membership in a European political family and the logo of their Europarty is not placed on campaign material. A recent study into the Europeanisation of parties analysed the presence of the logo or reference to European parties on the websites and campaign materials of national parties. It shows that only a small number of parties are actually Europeanised as regards the disclosure of their link to their political family (Cicchi 2021). For example, more than half of ALDE member parties and more than 40% of member parties of the ECR do not state their European party on the homepage of their websites while all parties affiliated to the EDP do so (Drounau, 2021). Discussions are underway to harmonise campaign material with a view to achieving greater visibility for European parties during campaigns, though it seems that Member States are still very reluctant to move in this direction. As stressed by a person interviewed by the authors (S&D, Brussels, 26 September 2022), “national party systems are still stuck in the last century and will be the last to Europeanise”.

The question of transnational lists has not yet been settled but is often presented as a means of increasing the visibility of European political parties during European elections⁵. This would give political parties considerable power to constitute their transnational list, while at present European parties have little say in the constitution of lists for the European elections. However, some believe that if European parties are supposed to be “stakeholders to raise awareness among European citizens, transnational lists will not break with the current approach in which the strength of European political parties depends on the

5 Christine Verger (2018), Transnational lists: a political opportunity for Europe with obstacles to overcome, the Jacques Delors Institute, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/transnational-lists-a-political-opportunity-for-europe-with-obstacles-to-overcome/>

strength of their national members” (interview PES, video-conference, 27 September 2022). It is nevertheless possible that transnational lists would mark a departure for European parties, finally giving them real power, and would address a key concern felt by citizens, namely stronger debates and greater visibility of European affairs (Eurobarometer survey 89.2 of the European Parliament).

I EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE *SPITZENKANDIDATEN* SYSTEM

Another proposal to “Europeanise” the European Parliament elections and strengthen the role of European political parties in election campaigns is the lead candidate or “Spitzenkandidat” system in which Europarties nominate their candidate for the presidency of the European Commission⁶. The candidate who wins a majority at the European Parliament thereby becomes President of the Commission. One of the main justifications of this system is based on the idea that having a visible political figure and clear policies during the European elections would increase awareness of the importance of the election and boost participation (Hamřík and Kaniok 2019; Hobolt 2014). The Spitzenkandidaten would present their Europarty’s ideological political project for the EU’s future, and would act as the Europarty’s political embodiment. As a result, the system would give European political parties a significant opportunity as the Spitzenkandidat would be the main face of a genuinely European campaign.

While the origins of the Spitzenkandidaten system are found in the Maastricht Treaty (see Van Hecke and Wolfs 2018), it was applied for the first time during the 2014 European elections. During the election campaign, five Europarties appointed their candidates for the presidency of the Commission (see table 3). Following an intense inter-institutional struggle between the European Council and the European Parliament, Jean-Claude Juncker, the candidate of the EPP – the largest formation in the European Parliament – was appointed and elected as President of the European Commission.

However, the lead candidate system was not successful in 2019. This time, seven Europarties appointed a lead candidate, none of whom

6 Olivier Costa and Pauline Thinus (2022), Spitzenkandidaten, oui ou non ?, the Jacques Delors Institute, <https://institutdelors.eu/publications/spitzenkandidaten-oui-ou-non/> (in French)

actually became President of the Commission. Ultimately, it was Ursula von der Leyen – former German minister of defence and member of the EPP – who was appointed to this position. This was mainly due to the strong opposition of heads of State and government in the European Council, who found that neither the EPP candidate Manfred Weber nor the PES candidate Frans Timmermans were acceptable candidates. As a result, although it existed as part of Europarties’ campaign approach, the lead candidate system did not materialise a second time.

Table 3. Lead candidates of European political parties in 2014 and 2019

European party	Lead candidate in 2014	Lead candidate in 2019
EPP	Jean-Claude Juncker (Luxembourg)	Manfred Weber (Germany)
PES	Martin Schulz (Germany)	Frans Timmermans (the Netherlands)
ALDE	Guy Verhofstadt (Belgium)	“Team Europe“: Nicola Beer (Germany) Emma Bonino (Italy) Violeta Bulc (Slovenia) Katalin Cseh (Hungary) Luis Garicano (Spain) Guy Verhofstadt (Belgium) Margrethe Vestager (Denmark)
EGP	José Bové (France) Ska Keller (Germany)	Bas Eickhout (the Netherlands) Ska Keller (Germany)
PEL	Alexis Tsipras (Greece)	Nico Cué (Belgium) Violeta Tomic (Slovenia)
ECR	<i>No candidate</i>	Jan Zahradil (Czech Republic)
EFA	<i>No candidate</i>	Oriol Junqueras (Spain)

The European Parliament is in favour of reviving the lead candidate system for the 2024 European elections. In its position paper on the reform of the European Electoral Act, the Parliament proposed to introduce a political agreement between European political parties running for the elections and an inter-institutional agreement between the Parliament and the European Council through which the President of the European Council would undertake to consult the leaders of Europarties and political groups to inform the process of appointing the President of the Commission. The electoral law reform is currently being negotiated between the Council and the Parliament. It remains to be seen whether these provisions will be included once the final text is adopted.

In theory, the internal selection process for Spitzenkandidaten is an important opportunity for European political parties to increase their visibility and step up the involvement of individual members and citizens. However, in practice, the appointment of lead candidates is broadly controlled by national member parties, and the potential involvement that could be brought about by the internal selection process remains under-used (Put et al., 2016; Wolfs et al., 2021).

Within the European People's Party, the selection process was broadly similar ahead of the 2014 and 2019 elections. Candidates had to obtain the official support of their own national party and – in order to prevent a sponsorship race – of at most two additional member parties from other EU Member States than the candidates' countries of origin. Then, the candidate obtaining the absolute majority of votes – not counting abstentions – of delegates of the EPP's electoral congress was appointed the EPP's candidate for the presidency of the Commission. In 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker was elected the Europarty's Spitzenkandidat with 61% of votes, against 39% for Michel Barnier. It was at the EPP's congress that Angela Merkel had to accept Jean-Claude Juncker's appointment as President of the Commission, although she did not accept the Parliament's interpretation of the Treaty of Lisbon (Alain Lamassoure, February 2023). In 2019, Manfred Weber was appointed lead candidate with almost 80% of votes. The only other contender, Alexander Stubb, obtained the support of 20% of delegates.

The selection process for the Party of European Socialists was quite similar in 2014 and 2019, with the exception of the support threshold that internal candidates had to achieve to be considered for the Spitzenkandidat position being increased from 15% to 25% of PES member parties in 2019. The higher threshold made it more difficult to appoint potential candidates in 2019. Two candidates were able to win sufficient support:

Frans Timmermans and Maros Sefcovic. Nicolas Schmit, a third potential candidate was below the threshold, and the former Chancellor of Austria, Christian Kern, also announced his intention to run, but withdrew from the contest before the deadline for declaring the intention to run as candidate. The PES' procedure also gave party members an opportunity for greater involvement: once the internal candidates were announced, each member party could use its own internal procedure to decide the candidate(s) it supported, a specific provision of the rules explicitly authorising party primaries or open elections. These internal procedures would be organised during a "common day for the PES' European elections". However, as Sefcovic withdrew from the contest (support from member parties seemed greater for Timmermans), such an election day proved to be redundant, and Frans Timmermans was officially elected lead PES candidate during the February 2019 electoral congress.

The ALDE party made major modifications to its procedure ahead of the 2019 European elections, but these changes did not herald greater democratisation. In 2014, the selection procedure to appoint a Spitzenkandidat was broadly copied from the process to elect the ALDE party president. Two candidates ran: the former Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt and European Commissioner Olli Rehn. Instead of an election contest, a compromise was negotiated: Guy Verhofstadt became the ALDE party's candidate for the presidency of the European Commission and Olli Rehn for one of the other top positions in the EU. Despite this mixed experience, its statutes were amended to include this ad hoc selection process in 2015. However, in 2019, ALDE preferred to conduct an election campaign with a group of candidates rather than organising a contest: "Team Europe" was made up of Nicola Beer, Emma Bonino, Violeta Bulc, Katalin Cseh, Luis Garicano, Guy Verhofstadt and Margrethe Vestager.

The European Green Party organised the most inclusive selection procedure in 2014: an EU-wide on-line primary open to all citizens aged sixteen and above who supported the green political platform, with a view to electing a Spitzenkandidaten tandem. Ska Keller and José Bové received the most votes and became the Europarty's main candidates. The use of open primaries was an important means of generating citizen enthusiasm for European political parties' activities. However, in 2019 this instrument was shelved. Instead, candidates were selected by member parties. A candidate had to be first proposed by a party member before September 2018. Four candidates decided to

run in the contest: Petra De Sutter, appointed by Groen (Belgium), Bas Eickhout by GroenLinks (the Netherlands), Ska Keller by Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Germany) and Atanas Schmidt by Zelena Partija (Bulgaria). Subsequently, the candidates had two weeks to win support from five other member parties. Atanas Schmidt did not receive sufficient support. In the next phase, to be elected, a candidate had to win an absolute majority of votes. Ska Keller finished in the lead with more than 50% of votes in the second round. At the second round for second place, Bas Eickhout won 62% of votes against Petra De Sutter.

It is still too early to know which selection process will be used by the Europarties which will attempt to revive the Spitzenkandidaten process in 2024, but the trend was not in favour of internal democratisation in 2019 and this is likely to remain the case in 2024. Recent party congress events appear to point towards a drive to support the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, with a strong parliamentary approach for certain parties such as Renew. However, most parties do not seem to be working towards an open procedure or primary to appoint their candidate(s). There is enormous potential for involvement and communication during this phase. As highlighted by various researchers, beyond appointing a candidate, European political parties must also come to an agreement for the parliamentary term after the election, a sort of coalition agreement so that the winning candidate has the resources and support to implement the programme (Costa and Thinus 2022) and in doing so show citizens that their vote in the European elections has a real bearing on the policies conducted on a supranational level.

II • The (failing) cohesive function of European political parties: members

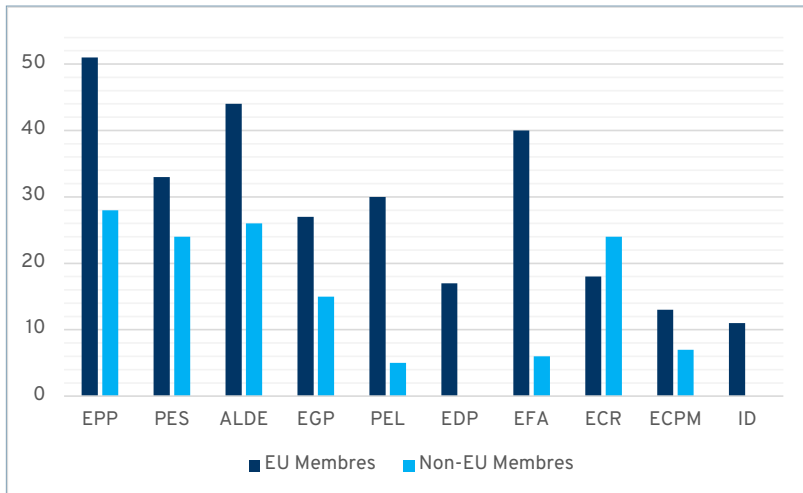
Political parties have a key function of acting as a bridge between citizens and the political system, during election periods and also between elections. This function is particularly covered by the issue of membership and there are fundamental differences between national and European parties in this respect.

I MEMBERSHIP STRUCTURE

In terms of membership, European political parties can to a great extent still be considered to be “parties of parties”, namely umbrella organisations with national members. Most European political parties make a distinction between fully-fledged member parties and various forms of ancillary membership with more limited rights. For example, the EPP grants the “ordinary member” status to parties within the EPP. Parties in candidate countries or Member States of the European Free Trade Association may become “associate members”: they are represented in the Europarty’s bodies, but may not take part in decisions concerning the policies and structure of the EU’s political system. Member parties without voting rights are known as “observer members”: these are parties in the EU, candidate countries or Member States of the Council of Europe which are ideologically close to the EPP and accept its statutes and internal regulations, but cannot take part in internal decisions. This type of membership is generally a springboard towards ordinary or associate membership. Lastly, the EPP introduced the “EPP partner” member category for parties sharing the same ideas outside Europe, which are for example members of the Centrist Democrat International or the International Democrat Union. When he was President of the EPP, Joseph Daul devoted part of his term of office to relations with sister parties in the Balkan nations, making many trips to the region and organising quarterly meetings with the political body that groups together the parties from these countries (Alain Lamassoure, February 2023). Most of the other Europarties apply a similar form of membership by category: the PES uses the categories of full members, associated members and observer members, ALDE distinguishes between full and associate members, while the EGP has members, associate members and candidate members. The ID and ECPM are the only Europarties that do not differentiate between membership types.

The example of the EPP shows that most European political parties are also made up of members outside the European Union, although there are major differences between parties (table 4). While certain Europarties such as the ECR have more members outside the EU than within it, others, such as the EDP and the ID party, only have members in EU Member States. Most parties that are not members of the EU are based in the United Kingdom, EU candidate countries, the Western Balkans and the countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Table 4. Share of EU and non-EU members within European parties



▲ Source: Nathalie Brack, Wouter Wolfs

However, since 2017, European political parties are no longer authorised to accept contributions from parties outside the EU. Such a ban has never been clearly set out in the funding rules but is a result of a narrow interpretation of the European Parliament. In 2017, it refused a membership fee payment of €133,044 made by the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP) to the ECR. According to the European Parliament, the PAP did not meet the legal definition of a “political party” as defined in the regulatory framework for European political parties. The ECR challenged this decision before the Court of Justice of the European Union, but to no avail. This interpretation had far-reaching consequences: all contributions from members in parties located outside the

EU are now viewed as (foreign) donations, which have also been prohibited since 2018 following an amendment to the funding rules⁷. As a result, all financial ties between Europarties and their members outside the EU have been severed. For some Europarties, this could endanger the relations between the European party organisation and its non-European member parties. For example, the Scottish National Party has been one of the largest members of the EFA, while the Labour Party has traditionally been an important member of the PES.

The Parliament's interpretation is surprising, as all European political parties have had non-EU member parties since their foundation, and they have always paid a membership fee. These links between European political parties and non-EU member parties are important, as they can be viewed as a form of (party) foreign policy and a vehicle for promoting democracy. European political parties can play a key role in new democracies or during democratic transitions by presenting the political elites in these countries with democratic standards and values. For example, Europarties made efforts in candidate countries prior to the 2004 and 2007 enlargements to promote democracy and party ties (Bressanelli 2014; Day and Shaw 2006, 19). Following this cycle of post cold war enlargements, Europarties continued to satisfy an important democratic function in the Western Balkans and countries of the Eastern Partnership, while partisan interests did complicate this process (Chrysosgelos 2017, 2021).

I THE ISSUE OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVISTS

If we consider the statutes and internal regulations of European political parties, we see that most of them only give brief provisions concerning individual members. While all parties offer a form of individual membership, in most cases this is limited to affiliated members of parliament. In both the EPP and the PEL, only members of parliament of the corresponding EP groups can become individual members. Similarly, within the ECPM, individual membership is restricted to affiliated members of a parliament (European, national or regional) and individual members of the ECR are MEPs or European Commissioners.

⁷ 2018 was the first year of application of the new regulation 1141/2014, which completely prohibits foreign donations.

In theory, other Europarties have introduced provisions aimed at involving individual citizens. Most use a form of “light” or “indirect” membership. In addition to “individual members” – which only include affiliated members of European institutions and national or regional parliaments – the EDP has introduced a “full member” category. These are individual citizens who are members of one of the EDP’s member parties or otherwise those who have paid a membership fee. A similar difference can be seen for the EFA: while individual membership is limited to persons who are holders of an elected office, the Europarty has also created the “Friends of EFA”, who are individual supporters of the Europarty. This remains, however, a small network of less than fifty individuals.

The PES offers a form of indirect membership: all members of PES member parties are automatically members of the Europarty. In addition, these individual members can register as “PES activists”. The PEL applies a similar system, although its member parties can decide whether or not to authorise this option. As a result, they can act as important gatekeepers to the Europarty’s individual membership in their country.

It should be noted that these individual members enjoy limited rights: the Friends of the EFA can send a delegate to the Europarty’s General Assembly, PES activists can collectively present political proposals during the PES Congress, and members of the PEL can propose amendments and take part in the Europarty’s meetings. However, under no circumstances do individual members enjoy voting rights in the internal decision-making process.

The two Europarties with the most extensive forms of individual membership are the ID and the ALDE party. Within the ID, individual membership is not limited to holders of public office and individual members have the right to take part in meetings of the general assembly, submit policy proposals and vote in ID decisions. However, as the Europarty only has three individual members (see table 5), these provisions remain broadly theoretical.

Within ALDE, a direct individual membership system was already added to the Europarty’s statutes in 2004, but was only implemented a decade later. The introduction of direct individual membership satisfied a goal that was both ideological and strategic. In accordance with ALDE’s traditional pro-European position, it was seen as a means of developing the European public space and, more broadly, European democracy. From a strategic standpoint, it strengthened ties with citizens feeling

affinities with the liberal political platform, but who do not have a (significant) liberal party in their country, which is the case in several Member States in the South and East of the EU (Wolfs and Van Hecke 2019, 273). Every two years, individual members of the ALDE party elect a delegation which takes part in the party's internal decision-making and enjoys voting rights in its main governing bodies.

As a result, broadly speaking and with the exception of ALDE, individual members only enjoy relatively limited involvement in Europarty internal policymaking. In most cases, citizens only have access to indirect or light membership, with limited possibilities of taking part in deliberations and decisions made by the Europarty concerning internal affairs or political positions. The number of individual members of European political parties is also indicative of citizens' limited participation. In 2020, only ALDE had more than 1,000 members, and PEL slightly more than 400. All the other European political parties have no more than 55 members.

The relative success of DIEM25 and Volt show that there is potential for European citizens to become individually engaged. The two organisations have more members than any Europarty: Volt has more than 5,000 individual members and DIEM25 is said to have more than 100,000. A recent study of the FEPS⁸ (the political foundation of the PES) takes a clear stance in favour of creating more room for individual activists within the PES, but the party's position has remained unchanged for now.

8 FEPS (2022), *Transforming the Political Union: Reinforcing europarties ahead of the European elections*, <https://feps-europe.eu/publication/transforming-the-political-union/>

European political parties	Number of individual members
European People's Party (EPP)	16
Party of European Socialists (PES)	0
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	1,340
European Green Party (EGP)	55
Party of the European Left (PEL)	410
European Free Alliance (EFA)	3
European Democratic Party (EDP)	3
European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR)	55
European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)	35
Identity and Democracy Party (ID Party)	3

▲ Source: European Parliament and APPF websites

III • Parties' influence on European policy

Another key function of parties in a democracy is their participation in the process to draft policy decisions. Once again, the European institutional framework differs from national political spaces. Without a lead candidate, the purpose of European elections is not to appoint an EU executive and national parties retain control over the composition of candidate lists for the European election. Moreover, while on a national level the party dominates the parliamentary group, the relationship between the political group in the EP and the Europarty is more complex. However, European parties do have considerable influence in the decision-making process. Firstly, they have a group in the EP, which means they are closely involved in decisions made within this institution. Secondly, they have a growing influence through their coordination work in the margins of Council and European Council.

I EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL GROUPS AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: AN ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP

Each of the various Europarties represents a political family, forming the European party landscape. This ranges from the radical left (the Party of the European Left) to the radical right (Identity and Democracy), with the centre-left (the Party of European Socialists) and the centre-right (split between the EPP, ALDE and the EDP), the greens (EGP), conservatives (ECR) and regionalists (EFA). These political families are all represented within the EP but most of the parliamentary groups have several political families or seek to group together as many as possible. The larger the group, the more influence it enjoys and the more opportunity it has to build up majorities for its positions and resources. The exceptions are the socialists and the far right, which have a relatively homogenous group at the EP in terms of European affiliation⁹. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group at the European Parliament (S&D) brings together elected representatives primarily from PES members while ID group has members from the party of the same name and non-affiliated members. The EPP,

⁹ The uniformity of the extreme right family refers in this respect to the relationship between the political party and the group, and not a shared ideology given that the low level of internal cohesion during voting in the EP demonstrates that on certain topics (it is interesting to look at which ones) there are disparities between the far right's ideology.

the largest group at the EP, includes MEPs affiliated to the party and in addition a few members of the ECPM. Similarly, the conservative group includes MEPs from the European Conservatives and Reformists Party and also members of the ECPM and the European Free Alliance. The radical left GUE/NGL group has MEPs affiliated to the Party of the European Left and others to the Now the People! political movement, Animal Politics EU and the European Anti-Capitalist Left network. As its name suggests, the Greens/EFA group includes MEPs from the European Green Party and the European Free Alliance. It is a long-standing coalition that enabled MEPs from these parties to form a group at the EP. It now includes members of the European Pirate Party, in addition to its independent members. Lastly, the Renew group includes MEPs from ALDE, the EDP and a series of representatives from parties that are not affiliated to a Europarty such as Renaissance, Horizons, Gibanje Svoboda and Polska 2050. Due to this specific structure, the group has influence over the European parties to which its members are affiliated and the group president plays a key role for coordination, federation and impetus. Ahead of the next European elections, attempts to restructure the group are underway. The format of this restructuring operation is not yet clear and fluctuates between a merger of liberal and democrat families on a European level (the most structured option) and a platform broadly bringing together liberals around a shared platform and joint meetings (interview Renew, video-conference, 11 November 2022).

The introduction of separate subsidies for European political parties and the related funding rules also had a major impact on the relations between Europarties and their corresponding political groups, and had a (positive) effect on internal party organisation. Firstly, the financial system cut the ties between groups and parties, as group resources can no longer be used to support parties. Prior to 2004, most Europarties were heavily dependent on their group for staff and funding. This situation is no longer allowed. Europarties have acquired a significant degree of autonomy and as a necessity were able to establish separate headquarters outside the European Parliament and hire their own staff. The major European parties in particular were able to increase their numbers significantly, which resulted in a certain level of specialisation and professionalisation. As noted by a person interviewed (EPP, Brussels, 10 November 2022), “thanks to Europarty funding, these parties have become more independent from their members”. However, smaller Europarties still operate with only a limited secretariat (Wolfs, 2022, 252-255).

The division of labour between the political group and the party is broadly similar for the main European political families. The group conducts legislative work, tends to be more cohesive and has a strong socialising role. Within the parties, group members often play the role of aggregating a European vision of issues and within the PES, the S&D group tends to be a major source of ideas (interview S&D, video-conference, 18 November 2022). The party can then act as a coordinator of its national members, which are not always represented at the EP. This role is often hampered by national considerations and an approach based on unanimity or consensus. Meetings are often held between the group and the party and they regularly organise joint activities. Most parties also aim to maintain personal ties with the group, for example by appointing (former) MEPs as president, or even by combining the roles of group and party president, as is the case of the EPP since 2022.

I THE SPIDER'S WEB OF EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES: COORDINATION AHEAD OF COUNCIL AND EUROPEAN COUNCIL MEETINGS

Scientific research consistently demonstrates that the primary role of European political parties is based on coordination, at three levels: (i) vertical coordination, acting as a bridge between the national and European levels, (ii) horizontal coordination, to avoid a silo effect between European institutions, as parties are present in the four main institution (EP, Commission, Council and European Council), and (iii) diagonal coordination, connecting stakeholders on a national level (see Drachenberg, 2022; Pittoors, 2021, 2022).

Through each of these three levels, European parties take part in the decision-making process. However, they have the most influence through their horizontal and vertical coordination, in particular through a set of informal meetings to prepare Council and European Council meetings. Once again, there are differences between parties in terms of the driving force and organisation of this coordination. Their influence varies according to their importance and role within the European institutions. When a party holds the presidency of the Commission, the EP or even the European Council, it can become very powerful, as was the case of the EPP.

Groups tend to be the dominant stakeholders in relations with the Commission. The socialist group holds a monthly meeting in Strasbourg between the group's Bureau and the Commissioners from its political family. The Renew group also holds a dinner between the group pre-

sident and the Commissioners from its political family once a month.

Parties play a developing role in the preparatory work for Council and European Council meetings, again, together with the key figures of their group at the EP. This is particularly the case for three political families: socialists, liberals and the EPP. These three families have a long-standing major representation within the Council and the European Council. Their respective European political parties have therefore set up a coordination between Ministers or Prime Ministers ahead of Council and European Council meetings. These meetings pursue several aims. The idea is to coordinate the position within a single political family, inform (Prime) Ministers of the positions of their colleagues within the political family and seek to organise coalitions. The aim is to influence decisions, but these meetings do not generally have the explicit goal of defining a common official position. There is not actually enough time to arrive at a common position, given that these preparatory meetings take place late in the European decision-making process and the draft conclusions of the European Council have already been distributed and discussed in working groups, at the Coreper and in geographical groups (Benelux, Visegrád Group, etc.). These meetings are also useful to draft long-term strategies, socialise and build up a network within the political family (Drachenberg 2022). They are also an opportunity for “new arrivals” to make a name for themselves within their political family (Alain Lamassoure, February 2023). They are being held with greater frequency within the three main political families and Ministers and Prime Ministers have become reliant on these coordination meetings. Only a decade ago, the Europarty had to insist among its members. The opposite is true today (interview PES, video-conference, 25 October 2022). During these meetings, European political parties are a key player in vertical and horizontal coordination as they bring together the representatives of their national members, the Commissioners affiliated to their political families and the representatives of their group in the EP (coordinators, rapporteurs, president).

The socialist family held its first preparatory meeting of the European Council, known as a pre-summit, in 1974 (long before the European Council was formalised as an institution) while the EPP held its first meeting of this kind in 1980. The liberals started later, with the first meetings of leaders in the 1990s (Van Hecke and Johansson 2013). These meetings have gradually become more frequent and have been institutionalised. The EPP tends to view these pre-summits as major party events, as they are one of the main ways that this political family exer-

cises its influence. At the PES, the election of Poul Nyrup Rasmussen as leader in 2004 increased the party's importance and formalised meetings aimed at strengthening relations between Prime Ministers and the socialist family. Since 2007, pre-summits were held twice a year and since 2014 a preparatory meeting has taken place before each meeting of the European Council. In the liberal family, as the party and the group do not overlap, the group takes the lead and has a highly operational role in the organisation of pre-summits of the European Council meetings.

In addition to these pre-summits, political families also meet ahead of Council meetings. This time, European political parties are generally in charge of coordination. The EPP has been holding these meetings since 2007, ALDE/Renew started to organise them in 2015 but some believe that their value remains relatively limited given differences within the group (interview Renew, video-conference, 11 November 2022). The PES has been organising such meetings for a long time for certain formats of the Council, but recently increased the number of formats concerned to include agriculture, general affairs and competition, for example (Drachenberg 2002). The green political family has also started to organise meetings of this kind, mainly ahead of ministerial meetings, following the election success of several of its members and the arrival of green parties in government coalitions in several Member States. The party and the group share the coordination due to the strong legislative aspects of the issues but the group is the “inviting power”, not the party (interview with the Greens/EFA group, Brussels, 10 October 2022).

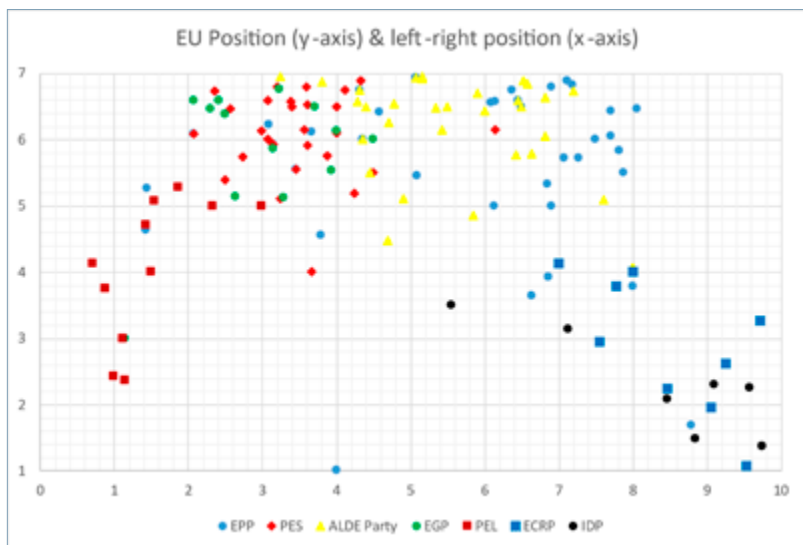
For most of these political families, these meetings result in the adoption of declarations, resolutions and common positions. Although there is no real harmonisation of positions as the national variable remains prominent within the Council and the European Council, these party networks and meetings facilitate negotiations and the decision-making process and indirectly give the European political parties some influence (Bardi et al. 2020; Johansson 2016; Van Hecke et al. 2018). Specifically, various studies show that through these networks European parties have successfully influenced the appointment of certain figures to the presidency of the Commission or the European Council (Johansson and Raunio 2019). They have also played a major role in treaty reforms (such as the EPP for the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam and the PES for the employment chapter of the Treaty of Amsterdam, see Johansson 2016) and during the adoption of the European Constitution (see Lamas-

soure 2004). More recently, the PES also successfully put certain items on the agenda through these meetings and the creation of coalitions ahead of European Councils, such as the Youth Guarantee. However, these observations should be tempered by two facts. Firstly, while European political parties may enjoy a high level of influence as part of inter-government conferences, this is much less the case for open conferences such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, during which political groups retain control (Johansson and Raunio 2022). Secondly, Europarties' influence depends on the weighting of the political family within European institutions and is also strongly correlated to their composition and internal cohesion. For historical reasons, some parties are relatively dominated by certain nationalities, which have a key role to play in group dynamics. The German delegation within the EPP is numerically and structurally important and has successfully inspired all the major strategic decisions in the parliamentary group and the EPP party, without giving rise to long-term hostile reactions (Alain Lamas-soure, February 2023). Furthermore, like the political groups within the EP, greater internal cohesion leads to a greater chance of exercising a higher degree of influence. Conversely, parties which are significantly divided and which fail to adopt a common line may struggle to influence decisions within the European institutions (Drachenberg 2022). It would appear that the main parties still experience similar tensions and divisions, between parties from the North and the South, the East and the West, and national interests remain an impediment to cohesion within the European political parties (interview S&D, video-conference, 18 November 2022; interview PES, video-conference, 27 September 2022; interview EGP, video-conference, 9 September 2022). Beyond the regional divide, internal Europarty cohesion on left/right and pro-/anti-integration aspects remain diverse depending on the party (see also Sigalas and Pollak 2012). In graph 4, we can see that some parties are relatively cohesive on the left-right position, but much less so when it comes to integration, such as the PEL. Conversely, others show more cohesion for issues concerning European integration than for issues related to the left-right divide, such as ALDE. Most Europarties are made up of members with a large disparity of positions on both axes, which does not facilitate their role of influence but which is the focus of the coordination work conducted by Europarties.

Conclusion.

A shift towards genuinely
European elections?

Graph 4. cohesion of European parties based on the position of their national member parties



▲ Source: calculations of the authors using the CHES database

The *raison d'être* of political parties in a democracy is to participate in elections to win political power and change policy direction. European parties, however, are in a unique position because, unlike their member parties, this is not their primary purpose. European parties are not intended to replace or duplicate national parties. In theory, European elections could provide Europarties with a unique opportunity to fulfil their constitutional mission, namely to “contribute to forming European political awareness and to express the will of citizens of the Union”. These elections are also a chance to raise their profile. However, the road to achieving this successfully is fraught with difficulties. As with all political parties, European parties must address a disillusionment with politics and a drop in citizens’ trust in parties. As many authors have observed, European democracies have experienced a considerable drop in the levels at which citizens identify with parties (Dalton, 2004), voter turnout (Blais et al. 2004), a rise in election volatility (Chiaromonte & Emanuele, 2015), and above all a significant erosion of trust in the representative institutions (Cordero & Simón, 2015; Caamano and Casal Bértoa 2019). This naturally has an impact on parties and Europarties. Furthermore, the way in which the European elections are currently organised places substantial limits on their ability to fully meet their electoral function.

The regulatory framework of European political parties is contradictory for their engagement during the European elections. Firstly, participation in the EP elections is one of the conditions that European parties must meet to receive EU financial assistance. Moreover, the important role that Europarties are supposed to play during European elections has been one of the main reasons why the public funding available to Europarties has been increased. Secondly, the funding rules include a number of provisions that significantly impede Europarties’ ability to play an important role in European elections.

Firstly, there are no pan-European electoral constituencies: all MEPs are elected in national constituencies. As a result, the selection of candidates and the roll-out of campaigns have remained primarily within the national remit (Marsh 2020; Nielsen and Franklin 2017). European elections are barely more than the sum total of 27 national elections. The creation of a pan-European constituency in which European political parties can present transnational lists to voters across the EU would significantly enhance the role of Europarties. They would become explicitly responsible for selecting transnational candidates and could conduct an electoral campaign that is more visible on an EU level and

based on a common manifesto. These political platforms would grow in importance and would have the potential of fostering more European electoral debates and of using guidelines for the legislative work of the corresponding group within the European Parliament. However, there is still no consensus on this matter between political families or between European institutions and Member States.

Secondly, the funding rules clearly state that European subsidies “should not fund, directly or indirectly, other political parties and, in particular, national parties or candidates”. Such a provision, and specifically the prohibition of direct financing, seems reasonable in order to prevent Europarties from transferring their EU subsidies directly to their national member parties with a view to influencing the outcome of national elections. There is a risk that Europarties become nothing more than platforms for the dissemination of campaign resources, like party organisations on a federal level in the United States. However, the prohibition of support, particularly indirect support for national parties, significantly curtails European parties’ capacity to campaign for the European elections and gives rise to legal ambiguity. While the definition of “direct funding” is clear – the transfer of money from European parties to national parties – that of “indirect funding” is more open to interpretation, particularly as European political parties and foundations are authorised to jointly organise events and activities with national parties or foundations. However, joint activities that are (primarily) funded by the European party and which benefit the national party may be considered as indirect assistance, and therefore a misuse of European funds. For example, even training courses held by a European party or foundation have been viewed as a form of indirect support when national politicians have attended them. As a result, Europarties must exercise caution when they campaign with their member parties, and joint meetings, posters with both the logo of the European party and the national party or a joint campaign tour have been avoided. At the same time, European political parties can only directly take part in the European elections through their national members, making the separation of campaign activities a difficult task.

The prohibition of direct and indirect funding applies to national candidates, in addition to national parties, including for the European elections. This has a far-reaching effect: European political parties can incur campaign expenses for their Spitzenkandidat in each Member State, with the exception of the country in which the candidate is on the electoral list for the European elections. For example, for the 2014

elections, the PES could not fund any campaign activities for its main candidate Martin Schulz in Germany, because he was on the list of candidates of the SPD, a member party of the PES. As a result, all campaign activities in Germany in which Martin Schulz took part had to be paid directly by the SPD.

Thirdly, even though European political parties roll out electoral activities, they come up against a wide range of national rules governing campaigning and funding. They must comply with these national provisions when campaigning in Member States. EU countries have very different ways of regulating election campaigns and issues such as expenditure limits and principles, the start of the official campaign period, campaigns conducted by third parties and ceilings and rules concerning revenues. While certain Member States such as Denmark or the Netherlands hardly regulate political campaigns, other countries such as Croatia, Ireland, Romania and Slovakia have implemented very strict rules. According to an assessment report of the 2019 European elections, ten EU Member States did not even authorise the funding of the national campaigns of European political parties for the elections of the European Parliament (Election Watch, 2019). In other words, regardless of whether the door is open for joint campaigns between European and national parties on a European level, many Member States have securely locked it in their countries.

Despite this somewhat gloomy overview, European parties and their members still have some cards in their hand ahead of the 2024 and 2029 elections. Europarties must continue to demonstrate their importance for their members to offset the (relative) disinterest of national parties regarding their activities and what they have to offer. As noted by a person we interviewed (EGP, 9 September 2022), a European party must constantly prove its worth to exist, within the European public space but also and above all within national political spaces. European parties also play a key role in supporting new parties. Three instruments could raise the profile of European political parties. As discussed above, transnational lists would be a step towards greater influence for Europarties. This would compel national parties' interest as "the European party would have a real power and this would change the situation" (interview EGP, 9 September 2022). The success of Volt and Diem25 show that there is untapped potential for transnational mobilisation. Secondly, the *Spitzenkandidaten* process launched in 2014 could be furthered and improved, if each political family decides to present an influential and charismatic candidate who enjoys the support of the European poli-

tical party and of each of its members in the different Member States. The representatives of the main political families appear to agree on the importance of personalisation to encourage citizens to be more interested in European politics (interview EPP, Brussels, 10 November 2022): “so that on a European level each party has a face to represent it” (interview S&D, by telephone, 26 October 2022). It is, however, unlikely that all these reforms will be adopted and implemented by the 2024 elections. The 2029 elections seem to be a more reasonable target, both for a fully-functioning Spitzenkandidaten mechanism and for transnational lists or a lower number of seats in the EP. Lastly, the visibility of Europarties could be improved in the short term by ***systematically including their logo and programme in all campaign materials belonging to their member parties***. This would demonstrate their membership in a European political family and would contribute to a better identification of the stakeholders present for citizens.

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