Transnational Parties and Advocacy in European Integration

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is the product of joint research conducted over several decades within various research projects. Questions about transnational relations between political parties and political group dynamics in the European Parliament have remained important to us throughout our academic careers. We have been following these topics—transnational party cooperation inside or outside the European Parliament—for over 30 years. In fact, then as doctoral students, we first met in the mid-1990s in the context of a book project about representation in transnational parliamentary assemblies.

In this book, we consider the nature and significance of transnational parties in the European Union, called Europarties, as actors in their own right and their relevance for the development of European integration. The book revolves around their influence as well as limitations of such influence. In the book, we also reflect on what the Europarties' track record tells us about the future of the EU. At the time of finalizing our book, the Europarties were preparing for the 2024 European Parliament elections and there were debates among the EU institutions and national governments about potential Treaty revisions—with the Europarties themselves actively advocating further integration. Such advocacy is at the heart of our book. The book deliberately focuses on broader patterns and avenues of influence related to advocacy and agenda-setting rather than on specific issues or policy processes. The rationale for this choice lies in the fundamental challenge facing students of Europarties:

party politics is ever-present in EU governance, but measuring its precise impact vis-à-vis other factors is inherently difficult. For every issue where Europarties have directly shaped outcomes, there are other processes where such partisan influence is weak or indirect. However, European integration simply cannot be understood without paying attention to the agenda-setting and continuous advocacy of the Europarties.

Earlier versions of Chapter 5 that focuses on the Conference on the Future of Europe were presented at the annual conference of the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) in Lille in September 2022, in a report presented at a webinar organized by the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS) in March 2022, and in a chapter in an edited volume in 2022 (*European Parliament's Political Groups in Turbulent Times*, edited by Petra Ahrens, Anna Elomäki and Johanna Kantola), part of the book series *Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics*. We are grateful to SIEPS for assistance in the preparation of the report and would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Ralf Drachenberg, European Parliamentary Research Service, provided valuable data for which we are very grateful. We are also indebted to our colleagues studying Europarties with whom we have exchanged ideas and arguments throughout our careers. They are too numerous to be listed here, but their support and insightful feedback are much appreciated.

Finally, we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of Palgrave Macmillan for constructive comments and support.

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Introduction: Europarties—Ubiquitous Yet Rarely Noticed

Introduction

European integration has an important transnational partisan dimension, which is often overlooked as the prime ministers and presidents of the member states get most of the media coverage. The key institutions of the European Union (EU) are in turn mainly presented as unitary actors, even though they consist of politicians representing different party families. Indeed, Europarties are most likely unknown entities even among the majority of activists of their national member parties. In the end, this is not surprising. In European Parliament (EP) election campaigns the political groups of the Europarties remain firmly in the background, and Europarties and the EP groups seldom feature in national media. Europarties and their EP groups are officially independent of each other, but it is nonetheless more realistic to view them as part of the same Europarty organization. Political groups exist in the Parliament, while Europarties are extra-parliamentary organizations that bring together national parties across the EU to pursue shared political objectives and to field candidates for leading positions in EU institutions, not least the post of Commission president (the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism).

Through their national heads of government, EP groups, and Commission portfolios, Europarties are in a powerful position to shape the laws and policies of the EU as well as the broader development of European

integration. Europarties and their EP groups have also decades of experience from Treaty amendments and inter-institutional bargaining. In these constitutional processes the Europarties have successfully campaigned in favour of deeper integration, the empowerment of the Parliament, and also the consolidation of their own position in the EU's political regime. But when scholars analyse Treaty reforms, they tend to either completely ignore Europarties or maybe just include occasional references to such party-political networks. Yet, the central argument of our book is that Europarties are ubiquitous but rarely noticed: they are present nearly everywhere and almost all the time, and while their influence is difficult to measure it is much stronger than previously recognized.

There are valid reasons why the party-political dimension of European integration has remained in the background. Member states are the key actors in bargaining about the future of Europe: their signatures are required for Treaty amendments and each country holds the power of veto. Thereby national governments and leaders, not least the German chancellor or the French president, are in the limelight and also get most of the scholarly attention in analyses of Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC). At the same time, there is a range of studies detailing how the main Europarties—those whose national member parties hold executive power in the member states—have shaped Treaty outcomes, particularly through coordinating positions ahead of and during the IGCs.

Heads of government or party leaders may also prefer not to talk about their transnational partisan networks. In IGCs or negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the bargaining is primarily framed in the media as a battleground of national interests, where governments are expected not to appear too soft vis-à-vis the other member states. In such an environment, leaders probably are not incentivized to reveal the true weight of partisan ties. The same applies also to European elections, where particularly national parties whose ideological profiles do not match those of their EP groups—with, for example, the EP group being considerably more pro-integrationist than the national party—might lose votes if they highlighted the policy positions of their European-level parties.

Scholars also face the simple problem of measurement. Europarties are ubiquitous, but how to capture their impact? While there are studies on individual Europarties and their role in various IGCs, this line of research typically employs cautious language when assessing the 'success' or influence of Europarties. A broadly shared view is that the impact of

Europarties depends particularly on the numerical weight of Europarty politicians—as prime ministers or heads of state in the European Council, as Commissioners, or in the Parliament—and the internal cohesion of the Europarty. Furthermore, their influence is always relative and should be examined against the background of national preferences. Here we come to the circular nature of preference formation as the positions of national parties and governments are in turn shaped by the positions of EU institutions and the Europarties.

This book does not claim to solve the problem of how much power exactly Europarties have in Treaty reforms or in the broader process of European integration. In fact, we fully understand the cautiousness of our colleagues, and in many ways are own approach reflects such measurement problems—and also explains why we theoretically focus on the concepts of advocacy and agenda-setting. These concepts are interconnected and emphasize how Europarties are continuously and through a variety of channels engaged in debates about the 'future of Europe'. The book therefore deliberately focuses on broader patterns and avenues of influence related to advocacy and agenda-setting rather than on specific issues or policy processes. For every issue where Europarties have directly shaped outcomes, there are other processes where such partisan influence is weak or indirect. However, the starting point of this book is that European integration cannot be understood without accounting for the impact of the Europarties. It identifies Europarties as transnational partisan actors that operate both at intergovernmental and supranational levels of EU decision-making. Europarties have consolidated their own organizational structures, and more importantly, have over the decades built their own networks and coalitions that enable them to wield influence in ways not captured by previous studies.

The next section of this chapter briefly summarizes existing knowledge and literature on Europarties.[1] Third section introduces our research questions, theoretical and conceptual choices, and explains how we contribute to both studies of EU governance and party politics. The final section outlines the structure of the volume.

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[1] The literature review intentionally focuses on select publications since the 1980s. Later chapters refer to more detailed findings from a broader set of studies.

Europarties: Organization and Influence

Europarties remain something of a black box in studies of both EU governance and political parties. There is an impressive amount of research on both the political groups in the European Parliament and on the EU policies of national parties, but the networks and influence of the Europarties deserve more serious scrutiny. While much of the previous research has explored the organization and even influence of the Europarties, our book is the first one to specifically focus on their role in the broader construction of European integration.

Research clearly shows that Europarties have become more important in the EU political system. Article 138a of the Maastricht Treaty (entered into force in 1993) assigned political parties a specific role to play in the political system of the EU: 'Political parties at the 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 'Party Article' was subsequently included in the Lisbon Treaty (2009): 'Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union'. This Treaty base provided the legal and political foundation for the decision to introduce since 2004 public funding of the Europarties from the annual EU budget (Johansson & Raunio, 2005; Wolfs, 2022)—which in turn has triggered the establishment of several new Europarties (some of which are now defunct). Table 1.1 lists the current ten registered Europarties and their corresponding EP political groups.

We concentrate in this book on the three largest and traditionally most influential European party families: the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the centre-left Party of the European Socialists (PES), and the centrist-liberal Alliance for Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE). EPP was already established in 1976, while the pre-existing confederations of liberal and socialist parties, also founded in the mid-1970s, were turned into actual Europarties in the early 1990s in the context of the inclusion of the above-mentioned 'party article' in the Maastricht Treaty.

The EPP is a mix of Christian Democrats and conservatives, joining together parties from all EU member states (e.g., Hanley, 2008: 85–116; Jansen & Van Hecke, 2011). The largest national party has traditionally been the combined German Christian Democratic Union/Christian

Table 1.1 Europarties, their EP political groups, and political families

Europarty	Political group in the European Parliament	Political family
European People's Party (EPP)	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP Group)	Christian Democrat/ (Liberal) Conservative
Party of European Socialists (PES)	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)	Socialist/Social Democrat
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE)	Renew Europe Group (Renew Europe)	Centrist/Liberal
European Democratic Party (EDP)	Renew Europe Group	Centrist
European Green Party (EGP)	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	Green
European Free Alliance (EFA)	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	Regionalist
Identity and Democracy Party (ID)	Identity and Democracy Group (ID)	Nationalist/ Eurosceptic
European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR)	European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)	(National) Conservative
Party of the European Left (PEL)	The Left in the European Parliament Group (GUE/ NGL)	Left/Democratic Socialist
European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)	ECR, EPP	Christian–Social

Source Adapted from Van Hecke et al. (2018: 16); website of the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (APPF): www.appf.europa.eu/appf/en/home/the-aut hority

Social Union (CDU/CSU). The conservative wing of the party family has strengthened over the years, not least through the addition of more conservative member parties from the Central and Eastern European member states. More recently, the position of Fidesz, the Hungarian nationalist party led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, caused heated debates inside the EPP. Referring to Orbán's government introducing measures that violate EU's values and human rights, the EPP group changed its internal rules in March 2021 so that national parties, and not just individual members of the EP (MEP), can be expelled from the group. Fidesz responded by quitting the group immediately. Even in early

2019, the Europarty EPP had suspended Fidesz's voting rights. Despite the numerical growth of conservative forces in the party family, the EPP has traditionally and consistently been in favour of closer European integration.

The Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community (CSP), founded in 1974, was transformed into PES in November 1992. PES brings together social democratic and socialist parties from across the Union. It supports further integration, primarily because, with monetary union and deeper economic integration, the defence of traditional goals of the left—such as social and environmental legislation and employment policies—requires European-level action to complement national measures. In the Parliament, the centre-left social democratic group was the biggest group from 1975 to 1999 elections (Hanley, 2008: 62–84; Külahci & Lightfoot, 2014; Ladrech, 2000; Lightfoot, 2005). The Federation of European Liberal, Democrat, and Reform Parties, founded in 1976, became the ELDR in December 1993, changing its name to ALDE in 2012. ALDE consists of various liberal and centrist parties, and in the Parliament has come to occupy a pivotal role between the groups of EPP and PES. ALDE is a firm advocate of deeper integration but includes a variety of centrist, social liberal, and more market liberal parties (Hanley, 2008: 117–137; Smith, 2014).

Existing research emphasizes the interaction between Europarties' development, both in terms of organizational consolidation and policy influence, and the broader deepening of European integration. To put it simply: the more supranational the EU regime both in terms of competencies and its decision-making structure, the more incentives national parties have for investing resources into Europarties and their capacity to influence decisions taken in 'Brussels'. In one of the first empirical contributions to the debate, Niedermayer (1983) concluded that the Europarties were organizationally quite weak and that their influence vis-à-vis the Commission was limited. Since then, successive Treaty reforms have transferred significant policymaking authority to the European level, and particularly the empowerment of the Parliament and the Commission has facilitated the increasing weight of party politics in EU governance.

Organizationally, the Europarties are quite similar. Their highest decision-making body is the congress. Other organs include the bureau (or council) and the presidency. Majority voting can be used, but Europarties essentially aim at unanimous decisions. The introduction of public funding of Europarties from the EU budget has reduced their

financial dependence on national member parties. However, as 'parties of parties', Europarties primarily serve as arenas for their member parties and remain constrained in their efforts to be actors in their own right. As a result, it is still more realistic to describe Europarties as federations of national parties or as party networks, at least when comparing them with the often centralized and hierarchical parties found at the national level. At the same time, it is evident that Europarties are, in the early twenty-first century, much more institutionalized and mature organizations, both in terms of their identity and structures, than the looser transnational parties or confederations that emerged in Europe in the 1970s (e.g., Gagatek, 2008).

Importantly from our perspective, Europarties fulfil a coordinating function: they promote the sharing and exchange of information, knowledge, and experience, and they play an important role in facilitating and institutionalizing networks (Johansson & Raunio, 2019; Ladrech, 2000). The major Europarties are strongly present in EU institutions, notably the Parliament and the Commission, and have active links to interest groups. Europarties also negotiate, both internally and with each other, key EU appointments, such as the presidents of the Commission, the Parliament, and the European Council. Furthermore, they work out political or action programmes for their corresponding EP political groups and manifestos for European elections. They adopt common policies in a broad range of topics, often through regular or ad hoc working parties, that cover major policy areas as well as party-related activities like campaign management. Moreover, Europarties prepare the ground for future enlargements by integrating interests from the prospective member states (e.g., Ibenskas, 2020; Öhlén, 2023; Pridham, 2014). Through their membership in the Europarties, parties from the applicant countries engage in partisan cooperation that is important in nurturing wider, pan-European political allegiances. In this connection, Europarties serve as vehicles for the diffusion of democratic values.

However, existing research grapples with the question of impact. Do Europarties matter? What influence do Europarties really have? Most of the existing research has focused on IGCs negotiating Treaty reforms. Here the evidence is somewhat mixed, but points in the direction of Europarties and their EP groups wielding, under the right circumstances, even decisive influence in the IGCs and the European Council summits. Their influence is conditional, with the effectiveness of the Europarties largely depending on the capacity to mobilize 'their' heads of national

governments for the party cause (Johansson, 2016, 2017; see also Van Hecke, 2010). Pre-European Council summit meetings among government/party leaders are a central aspect of this mobilization process, but, as shown in Chapter 4 of this volume, their significance appears to vary over time and across party families. Europarties have no formal powers to take decisions binding their heads of government, implying thus that successful *ex ante* policy coordination between national member parties is essential for Europarties to achieve their goals in the European Council. Obviously, the relative bargaining weight of individual Europarties is stronger when they are more strongly represented in the European Council (Drachenberg, 2022; Hix & Lord, 1997; Johansson, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2016, 2017; Lightfoot, 2005; Tallberg & Johansson, 2008; Van Hecke, 2004).

Interestingly, earlier research suggests that the format or institutional framework of the constitutional process matters, with the 'convention' model more likely to facilitate Europarty influence. Chapter 4 of this volume covers in more detail the 2002–2003 Convention on the Future of Europe, which resulted in the Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe—that subsequently became the Lisbon Treaty. The partisan dimension arguably played an important role throughout the Convention, not least during the final stages, with the Europarty networks building bridges between MEPs and national parliamentarians (see Chapter 4). This applied particularly to the largest Europarty, the EPP, which managed to exert significant influence in the Convention through its members and delegation leaders (Johansson, 2020: 115–122; see also Van Hecke, 2012). Here an obvious parallel is the Conference on the Future of Europe—analysed in Chapter 5 of this volume—which was delayed by one year because of COVID-19 but took place in 2021–2022. Also organized in the 'convention' or 'conference' format, there is clear evidence that the Europarties and particularly their EP political groups managed to shape considerably both the proceedings and outcome of the Conference (Johansson & Raunio, 2022b).

Another theme to be explored in the empirical chapters is the difficulties involved in drawing a line between Europarties and their corresponding EP political groups and the balance of power between them (Ahrens & Miller, 2023). For instance, while the EPP Group has played an important role in successive rounds of Treaty reform since the 1980s and has benefited from the resources of the European Parliament, it is the Europarty that has brought national government leaders together to act

effectively (Johansson, 2020). Those national leaders still dominate the playing field when it comes to issues decided in the European Council, the EU's highest decision-making organ. Those leaders are expected to care for domestic constituencies. A lot is at stake, politically as well as personally. Nonetheless, Europarties and their EP political groups have proven to be significant players at this level, too. Decision outcomes may also reflect asymmetries of information and power. All these actors are not equal. Some national parties are more influential than others and power asymmetries inside the Europarties and political groups cannot be avoided, with some individual MEPs and national delegations carrying more political weight than others (Johansson & Raunio, 2022a).

Europarties have actually emerged from their EP groups. As stated in the introductory section, Europarties and their parliamentary groups are officially independent of each other, but, in reality, they should be viewed as operating within the same Europarty organization. This applies particularly to the three main Europarties analysed in this volume. There is substantial overlap in terms of national parties. Measuring the percentage of MEPs belonging to the EP groups that were also members of a national party belonging to the corresponding Europarty, in the 2009–2014, 2014–2019, and 2019–2024 legislative terms, the overlap was almost complete, above 95%, in EPP, while it was lower in PES and particularly in ALDE after the 2019 elections. EP political groups are also strongly present in the various decision-making bodies of the Europarties. While the central offices of the Europarties have grown in size over the decades, the EP groups have substantially stronger resources than the respective Europarties, both in terms of funding and staff (for details, see Ahrens & Miller, 2023; Calossi, 2014; Calossi & Cicchi, 2019).

The EP party system has throughout the history of the Parliament been in practice dominated by the 'grand coalition' of EPP and PES (the official group name has been Socialists & Democrats, S&D, after the 2009 elections), with the liberal group (called Renew Europe after the 2019 elections when it formed a pact with the *La République En Marche!*, the party established by French President Emmanuel Macron) also present in the chamber since the 1950s (Ahrens et al., 2022; Bressanelli, 2014; Hix et al., 2007). EPP has been the largest party group since the 1999 elections. In January 2024, EPP controlled 178 seats, the S&D 141, and Renew Europe 100 (out of a total of 705 seats). In fact, since the 2019 elections the two largest groups, for the first time, control less than half of