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Inter-Parliamentary Contacts of Members of the European Parliament Report of a Survey

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Abstract

In the run-up to the EU Treaty of Lisbon, and its failed predecessor the EU Constitutional Treaty, there has been increasing attention for the formal links between the European Parliament and national parliaments. There is however very little systematic evidence of whether and how parliamentarians actually use these formal opportunities in practice. In this paper we report on a survey among members of the sixth European Parliament (2004-2009) about the way they coordinated their work with their national parties and representatives in national parliaments. The survey results confirm our hypothesis that most inter-parliamentary engagement actually proceeds through political parties rather than through the formal inter-parliamentary institutions that have been developed. Following up on this, three more conclusions come to the fore. One is that MEPs coordinate above all with party colleagues from their own country. Contacts with parliamentarians from other countries are much rarer. Secondly, we find that initiatives from MEPs towards the domestic level outweigh initiatives the other way around, and that a majority of MEPs considers that their national party engages too little with EP affairs. Finally, our results suggest that there is considerable variation between different party families in the standing that MEPs enjoy within their national parties, the amount of inter-parliamentary coordination, and the attention national parties pay to EU decision-making.

Keywords

European Parliament — Inter-Parliamentary Coordination — MEPs — Multilevel Parliamentary Field — National Parliaments — Political Science — Representative Democracy

Introduction

European Union decision-making relies on two channels of democratic representation: a channel of 'direct' representation based on a directly elected European Parliament (EP) and an 'indirect' channel, based on national parliaments (NPs) controlling their governments in the Council of the European Union and the European Council. Together these two channels ensure that the functioning of the EU is founded on representative democracy (TEU, Art. 10). Essentially, then, the European Union relies on some kind of representative network of multiple parliaments that together contribute to the democratic legitimacy of EU decision-making. In a recent paper, Ben Crum and John Erik Fossum (2009) propose to conceive of this network in terms of a "Multilevel Parliamentary Field".

In the run-up to the EU Treaty of Lisbon, and its failed predecessor the EU Constitutional Treaty, there has been increasing attention for the formal links between national parliaments, and between them and the European Parliament (cf. Maurer 2002; Neunreither 2006). However, there is very little systematic evidence of whether and how parliamentarians actually use these formal opportunities in practice. The most notable exception is Raunio (2000), who studied the interactions between EP party-delegations and their national parties. However, this study was conducted 1998 and hence does not capture any developments that have happened since. Also, this study analyses parties rather than individual parliamentarians and does not discuss the contacts of Members of the European Parliament's (MEPs) with parliamentarians from national parliaments other than their own.

In this paper we report on a survey among members of the sixth European Parliament (2004-2009) about the way they coordinated their work with representatives from national parliaments. Obviously, the European Parliament fulfils a key role in the "Multilevel Parliamentary Field" of the EU, as it alone embodies the direct channel of democratic representation in the EU while the indirect channel is fragmented across the parliaments of the 27 EU member states. What is more, the EP is dedicated to EU affairs full-time, while for most national parliaments EU affairs figure only besides their primary concerns with national politics. Hence, one can expect the EP to be involved in much of the coordination and communication that takes place in the EU parliamentary field, even if coordination may also take place among national parliaments without EP involvement.

The questionnaire basically addressed three kinds of inter-parliamentary contacts of the MEPs: official contacts and meetings with the national parliament of their own country; contacts with their national parties; and contacts with national parliamentarians from EU member states other than their own.

A key hypothesis that this survey sets out to review is that most inter-parliamentary engagement actually proceeds through political parties rather than through the formal inter-parliamentary institutions that have been developed. Indeed, our

* The survey on which this paper reports has benefitted from suggestions by John Erik Fossum, Chris Lord and Tapio Raunio, as well as from linguistic help by Amandine Crespy and research assistance by Danique Karamat-Ali. Research for this paper has been undertaken as part of the RECON Integrated Project sponsored by the European Commission under its 6th Framework Programme, contract nr. FP 6-028698.

findings confirm that most inter-parliamentary coordination between the MEPs and national politics proceeds through the party channel. Following up on these findings, three more conclusions come to the fore. One is that, to the extent that MEPs maintain contacts with national politicians, it involves above all party colleagues from their own country. Contacts with parliamentarians from other countries are much rarer. Secondly, we find that initiatives from MEPs towards the domestic level outweigh initiatives the other way around, and that a majority of MEPs considers their national party to engage too little with EP affairs. Finally, our results suggest that there is considerable variation between different party families in the standing that MEPs enjoy within their national parties, the amount of inter-parliamentary coordination, and also the attention that national parties pay to EU decision-making varies. Hence, we suggest that – to get a more comprehensive picture about the nature and quality of democratic representation in the EU – future research on parliaments in EU decision-making should stop treating parliaments as unitary actors but instead look more closely at parties as the main actors within parliaments and at how EU integration affects their standing and power relations vis-à-vis each other.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section briefly outlines the theoretical notions and the previous research that provided the background for the survey. After some essential information on the organisation of the survey and the response (for more, see the appendices), the main findings are presented in sections 4 to 6. Section 7 presents and discusses the main conclusions.

Dimensions of inter-parliamentary coordination in the EU

In a recent paper, Ben Crum and John Erik Fossum (2009) propose to conceive of the involvement of parliaments in EU decision-making in terms of a European “Multilevel Parliamentary Field”. This concept reflects the fact that democratic representation in EU decision-making runs through two parallel channels of democratic representation that serve to assure that the ‘will of the European’ is accurately reflected in the outcomes of EU decision-making. These are (a) a direct channel going from citizens to the directly elected EP and (b) an indirect channel in which citizens elect their national parliaments, which then control their governments when they engage in inter-state bargaining in the Council of the European Union or the European Council. The particular notion of a ‘field’ conveys that these parliamentary bodies serve a common function – to represent the European citizens – with regard to one and the same set of EU decisions, but that they are only loosely related to each other in doing so.

Further, the concept of a Multilevel Parliamentary Field goes to underline that it is not sufficient to just analyse parliamentary activities in separation from each other if one wants to come to an overall assessment of the democratic quality of EU decision-making. Rather, one also needs to look at the relationships between different parliaments, how parliaments interact and how these interactions feedback on the parliaments themselves and on the overall level and quality of democratic representation. However, most social scientific research so far has either focused on the channel through the European Parliament (e.g. Kreppel 2002; Hix, Noury & Roland 2005) or on the role of national parliaments (e.g. Maurer & Wessels 2001; Kiiver 2006). Much less empirical and theoretical attention has been paid to the

relations between different parliamentary sites within the EU, and to the interactions going on between them (but see Benz 2003 for a notable exception).

Inter-parliamentary relations in the EU Multilevel Parliamentary Field may be looked upon in different ways. One can well imagine there to be a sense of competition between the European Parliament and national parliaments over the question which representative channel can claim normative primacy: the national parliaments, because they have been established longest and tend to be most visible to the public at large, or the European Parliament, because it is fully dedicated to EU affairs. However, once it is accepted that both channels are ineradicably part of the EU's political structure, inter-parliamentary relations appear as a possible source of mutual empowerment rather than competition. Thus, coordination and cooperation between parliaments may strengthen parliamentary powers overall and, hence, increase the quality of democratic representation within the complex, multi-level polity of the EU (cf. Slaughter 2004; Maurer 2002; Crum & Miklin 2010).

If inter-parliamentary contacts indeed serve as a resource for parliamentarians in EU decision-making, then differences in the ways these contacts are organised and distributed may also reflect on the distribution of power among them. In particular, one would expect power to be associated with national or European parliamentarians who maintain the most and the most valued contacts. In contrast, parliamentarians who are less connected and also, apparently, less "in demand" can be taken to play a more marginal role in the EU parliamentary field.

One of the striking characteristics of the research on parliaments in EU decision-making is that it usually has treated parliaments as unitary actors (cf. Neunreither 2006: 166). On the one hand, research on the EP has focused on the EP's increasing powers vis-à-vis the Council and the Commission and how it uses these powers (Rittberger 2005). Research on national parliaments, on the other hand, generally has focused on the variations in the formal powers of different national parliaments vis-à-vis their governments (Bergman 1997; Raunio 2005) and, although much less often, on how parliaments actually use these formal powers (e.g. Pollak & Slominski 2003). Notably, both these lines of research do not thematise the possibility that the resources on which parliamentarians (can) draw may vary among them, even if they are members of one and the same parliament. However, it is anything but evident that members of the same parliament enjoy equal powers, contacts and resources.

In this survey of EP members, we explore three dimensions along which inter-parliamentary cooperation may vary. First, we look at the amount and the substance of cooperation and, especially, at the institutional channels through which MEPs maintain their inter-parliamentary relations. Here the main alternatives are between channelling the contacts through the formal parliamentary institutions or rather maintaining them through political parties and party-groups. Since the early 1990s, both the European Parliament and many national parliaments have introduced a range of institutional reforms to facilitate inter-parliamentary coordination. Thus, in many national parliaments, MEPs have been granted speaking rights or even membership of the parliaments' EU committee (Kiiver 2006: 117-8, 181-3; COSAC Secretariat 2005). In turn, on the side of the European Parliament, there has for instance been an increased usage of 'Joint Parliamentary Meetings' (Neunreither 2006: 167f.).

However, one can doubt whether these formal institutional settings are the preferred arenas in which parliamentarians maintain inter-parliamentary contacts in practice. In fact, the little empirical research we have on the issue rather suggests that inter-parliamentary relations are not so much maintained in formal parliamentary settings but rather through political party contacts (Neunreither 1994; Raunio 2000: 215f.; 2009: 324). The party setting has the advantages of trust and informality that make it possible to maintain quick, flexible and focussed contacts.

A second dimension we set out to explore concerns any variations in inter-parliamentary contacts *within* parliaments - between political parties. Parties are very heterogeneous organisations - not only regarding their ideological or material interests, but also regarding their resources and the functions they fulfil within a parliament. It therefore seems unlikely that all parties sitting in a particular parliament follow exactly the same pattern with regard to NP-EP coordination. One could think of various factors that may influence parties' motivations and abilities to engage in inter-parliamentary coordination: their size, their relation to the governments, their ideology etc. However, given the limited size of our sample, our findings with regard to this party-group dimension can be suggestive only and are limited to any deviant patterns among MEPs from the two largest party-groups in the EP, the conservative/Christian-Democratic parties that are affiliated to the EPP-ED and the Social-Democratic parties united in the PES-group.

Finally, a third dimension we set out to explore concerns whether MEPs only coordinate with national parliamentarians from their own country or whether they also actively engage with parliamentarians from nationalities other than their own. The latter would indeed be implied by the notion of a genuine parliamentary field, while if the former is the case, it rather suggests a parliamentary network in which MEPs operate as exclusive nodes for the contacts with their national parliament only, and that other MEPs are unlikely to interfere with these (cf. Crum & Fossum 2009: 257f.).

The presentation of the results in sections 4 to 6 roughly corresponds to the three dimensions distinguished. In section 4 we discuss contacts between MEPs and national parliamentarians from their own member states, focusing especially on the relative importance of the parliamentary and the party channel for inter-parliamentary coordination. Section 5 looks deeper into the substance of coordination, and here differences between party-groups come particularly to the fore. Finally, section 6 looks at relations of MEPs with national parliamentarians from countries other than their own. However, before turning to the findings, we need to say a few words on the organisation of the survey and the response it realised.

Organisation of the survey and response

The data for this survey were collected among members of the sixth European Parliament, whose term ran from 2004 until 2009. The survey was distributed in two rounds in the final months of their term: a first, electronic, round in October 2008 and a second, paper, round in April 2009 (limited to those who had not responded in the first round) (see Appendix 1 for further details on the administration of the survey).

Eventually, 84 MEPs (10.7 per cent) filled in the survey, five of whom did so anonymously. The respondents came from all party-groups, although some of the smaller party-groups (particularly the GUE-UEN) were somewhat underrepresented. Furthermore, the sample included 20 of the 27 nationalities represented in the EP, with older and more northern member states being somewhat overrepresented (see Appendix II for more detailed information on the response).

Given the limited size of the sample, the results below should be treated as suggestive for further research rather than as establishing any kind of definite findings. Furthermore, our ability to explore variations within the sample, across different party-groups and nationalities, has been limited to the two main party-groups (EPP-ED and PES) and the extent to which their respondents displayed notable deviations from the rest of the sample. Obviously, again, any such deviations should be treated with caution, even if they suggest possible patterns that merit further exploration.

Channels of inter-parliamentary coordination: parliaments versus parties

Attendance in national parliament

As said, to foster exchange and coordination with national MEPs, several national parliaments have introduced institutional measures to systematically integrate these MEPs into their EU related activities. In four EU member states (Germany, Belgium, Greece, and Ireland), MEPs are full members of the EU committee of the national parliament. In other parliaments, MEPs are entitled to attend meetings of the EU committee or sometimes even special plenary debates dealing with EU issues. Overall, in 2005, 19 NP chambers upheld standing invitations to MEPs to join parliamentary discussions and deliberations (COSAC Secretariat 2005; Kiiver 2006: 117-8; Neunreither 2006: 181-3). Still, research suggests that MEPs actually hardly use these possibilities (Hölscheidt 2001; Neunreither 2006: 181). The main reasons for this seem to be (a) the large spatial distance between the EP and most national parliaments, together with (b) often conflicting time schedules between the two parliaments (e.g. Raunio 2009).

Table 1: MEPs visits of committee meetings/plenary debates in National Parliaments

	MEPs
At least once a year	54 %
Less than once a year	25 %
Never	9 %
Not allowed	12 %
Total	100 %

Our findings confirm that MEPs do not attend plenary or committee debates in their national parliament very frequently (Table 1). Still, just over half of the MEP respondents reported that they attend meetings in the national parliament at least once a year. A quarter has occasionally attended sessions in the national parliament but does so on less than a yearly basis. The majority of the remaining 21 per cent that never attend meetings in the national parliament does so for lack of any formal rights to do so. Again in line with previous research, MEPs that have never attended a

meeting reported that the main reason for their absence lies in (a) a lack of time/opportunities and (b) a lack of interest/invitation from the side of the national parliaments.

Coordination with national party colleagues

Still, concluding from this situation that inter-parliamentary coordination between MEPs and their national parliaments is not working would be premature. While parliaments as institutions may not provide very strong incentives for regular coordination between MEPs and national parliamentarians, such contacts may well run through the alternative channel of the national party (Neunreither 1994; Kiiver 2006: 121; Raunio 2000; 2009: 324). National parties provide a natural link between national parliaments and the EP, as MEPs are elected on national lists of parties that also compete for the seats in the national parliament. In our survey, for instance, only 7 per cent of the MEPs belonged to a party that was not represented in a national parliament.

There are at least two reasons why inter-parliamentary coordination may be more successful in the party- than in the parliamentary channel. First, national parties have an incentive to control the behaviour of their representatives in the EP and to make sure that they do not behave in a way that is detrimental to the overall party's interest. MEPs, again, too have an interest in a good and close relationship with their national party, as they rely on its support for a potential re-election (Hix 2002). Second, coordination in the party channel may also work out better as it can be arranged more flexibly than cooperation through the official parliamentary level. Face-to-face meetings between party fellows may be arranged *ad hoc* and event driven. Also, they can take place in different contexts, like meetings of the party executive of which today often at least the leader of a national EP party group is a member (Raunio 2000: 213). Additionally, intra-party coordination of course does not necessarily imply meeting 'face-to-face'. On the contrary, previous research suggests that much of the coordination within parties takes place through personal ties and without meeting in person, e.g. via e-mail or phone (Neunreither 2006: 182; Raunio 2000: 215).

We find that personal contacts of MEPs with party colleagues are indeed much more frequent (Table 2) than their actual attendance at sessions in the national parliament (Table 1). Over 60 per cent of the MEPs whose party is also represented in their national parliament meet personally with colleagues of the national party at least once a month. Over a quarter does so even at least once a week. Contacts and coordination take place even more frequently via telephone or e-mail. Here, an absolute majority of the MEPs (53 per cent) reports discussing EU issues with their national colleagues at least once a week, and another 23 per cent do so about once a month.

Combining face-to-face meetings with contacts via phone or e-mail shows that 56 per cent of the MEPs discuss EU issues with their national colleagues on at least a weekly basis, while only 24 per cent do so less than once a month. In line with these results, only 14 per cent of the MEPs stated that 'there is hardly any coordination' between them and their party.¹

¹ Since, in this survey, we are looking at individual MEPs rather than at party-delegations at large, the actual amount of coordination might even be somewhat higher. Previous research suggests that a lot of

Table 2: Intra-party coordination: Frequency of contacts

	Face to face	E-mail/phone etc.
Once a week or more often	27 %	53 %
Once a month	35 %	23 %
1-4 times a year	26 %	18 %
Less frequently	13 %	6 %
Total	100 %	100 %

n = 80 (MEPs from parties represented in the national parliament)

Among the main European party families, there is considerable variation between the EPP-ED and the PES with regard to the level of contacts between them and their parties. While more than two-thirds of the Social-Democratic MEPs (68 per cent) are in contact with their national party at least once a week, this is the case for slightly less than half of the MEPs of the conservative parties (47 per cent).

Notably, in the contacts that MEPs maintain with their national party, the actor that figures most prominently are members of the party executive, which were mentioned by 60 per cent of the respondents (Table 3). This is a greater number than those who maintain contact with their party colleagues in the national parliament's EU committee. Interestingly, coordination with MPs from specialised committees is almost as common as coordination with members of the dedicated EU committees (41 per cent vs. 45 per cent). The NP group leader (party whip) and party fellows in the national government were mentioned, respectively, by 33 per cent and 36 per cent of the MEPs.

Table 3: Intra-party coordination: with whom do MEPs coordinate?

	MEPs
Party executive	60 %
Members EU committee	45 %
Members specialised committees	41 %
Group leader	36 %
Government	33 %

n = 80 (MEPs from parties represented in the national parliament)

Multiple answers possible, hence percentages sum up to more than 100 per cent.

Timing of inter-parliamentary coordination

Another issue to consider is the timing of coordination: does coordination take place ahead of EP-votes so that it may still serve to affect the position taken or does it take place after the votes so that it mainly serves as a means for *ex post* accountability (cf. Raunio 2000: 218). The findings in Table 4, suggest that coordination on specific issues is mostly limited to the important ones and that on these almost 40 per cent of the MEPs coordinate already ahead of the vote with their national parties. However, only 7 per cent of the MEPs coordinate their voting behaviour regularly ahead of the vote. 18 per cent of the MEPs stated that they regularly report about their voting behaviour *ex post* on important issues, and another 4 per cent does so even on a regular basis. Combining *ex-ante* and *ex-post* mechanisms for coordination shows that only 11 per

intra-party coordination between the EP and national parliaments runs via the leader of the EP delegation (cf. Raunio 2000). Such 'indirect' coordination is not reflected in our data.

cent regularly coordinate or report about their voting behaviour. On the other hand, as many as 37 per cent of the MEPs describe their coordination procedures as unsystematic.

Table 4: Timing of coordination

	MEPs
<i>Before votes</i>	
– Regularly	7 %
– Only on important issues	39 %
<i>After votes</i>	
– Regularly	4 %
– Only on important issues	18 %
<u>No systematic coordination/exchange</u>	<u>37 %</u>

Multiple answers possible, hence percentages sum up to more than 100 per cent.

Interestingly, we find that the share of MEPs from Social-Democratic parties that characterize the coordination with their national party as “unsystematic” lies at 21 per cent, significantly below that of the overall average.

The substance of coordination: Does coordination make a difference?

Next, we move from the form to the substance of coordination: what differences does it make and does it operate satisfactorily?

Influence on national party’s positions

At least in their own perception, MEPs play quite an important part in their party’s position finding processes regarding EU decision-making. 85 per cent of the respondents indicate that they have had an impact on their national party’s position on certain issues in the last legislative period. 27 per cent even say that this has *regularly* been the case. The main issues of the last EP term that are mentioned in this regard are the Lisbon treaty and the Services directive, followed by the REACH regulation. Also there were several mentions of EU policies in the field of social cohesion and social policy. Only 15 per cent indicated that they know of no occasion on which they have made a difference on the position of their national party on EU issues. Notably, MEPs from Social-Democratic parties appear to be quite influential in their national party. 42 per cent of them indicate that they *regularly* have an impact on their party position, while this is only the case for 19 per cent of the respondents from the EPP-ED.

Voting instructions

Obviously, inter-parliamentary coordination need not only be driven by interests on the side of the MEPs. The national party may seek coordination to control the behaviour of MEPs. To address such situations, we queried MEPs about how often they had received voting instructions during the last legislative term. The literature suggests that parties reserve voting instructions to some highly salient issues (e.g. Hix

& Lord 1997). Raunio (2000: 216f.) found in his 1998 study that regular voting instructions were rare: only 32.2 per cent of the parties instructed their MEPs on issues of fundamental importance while 47.5 per cent did so never.

Our results are quite similar to these earlier findings. Hardly any MEP (4 per cent) reported to receive voting instructions regularly. 36 per cent have sometimes received them, but as much as 60 per cent have never received any instruction throughout the whole legislative term. These patterns were relatively constant among the different party-groups. Among MEPs who had received instructions at least sometimes, the issues mentioned most often on which this had been the case were the Services directive and the Working time directive.

These findings thus suggest that the significant increase in the powers of the EP over the last 15 years has not led national parties to drastically tighten their control over their MEPs. One reason for this may be that, despite the fact that more and more competences have been transferred from the national to the European level, the overall attention of national parties for EU decision-making is still very low (cf. Ladrech 2007).

Overall evaluation of party attention for EP politics

Finally, we asked the MEPs how they evaluate the level of attention of their national party for EP politics. Notably, an absolute majority of 52 per cent of the MEPs considers that their national party is paying *too little* attention to EU decision-making. 48 per cent describe the amount of attention as adequate, and not a single MEP felt that for them there is too much attention from their party. Notably, Social-Democratic MEPs seem to be much less satisfied with their parties' attention to EU decision-making than conservative MEPs: while 61 per cent of Social-Democratic MEPs criticise their party for paying too little attention to the EU, 39 per cent of EPP-ED members do so.

Also, we did not find any hints for a positive correlation between the amount of attention paid and the frequency of voting instructions. This may be seen as an argument against the view mentioned above that a limited number of instructions reflects parties' limited attention to the EU. An alternative explanation may be that instructing their MEPs simply does not make much sense for national parties. As Lord (2010: 21) argues, most national party delegations simply are too small for their behaviour to have any effect on the outcomes in the EP. To maximise their impact, national parties instead heavily rely on cooperation with, and the resources of, their respective EP groups. This view is supported by expert interviews we conducted with representatives from the Austrian parliament² according to which parties on the national level are well aware of the fact that MEPs need sufficient leeway to being able to cooperate effectively with their party-groups in the EP and that they cannot always only pursue their own national party's interest.

² Interviews with representatives of the Austrian Social Democratic Party and of the Austrian People's Party, 27 and 28 October 2009.

Contacts with National Parliaments from other Member States

Participation in formal inter-parliamentary gatherings

Looking at the interactions of MEPs with national parliamentarians from countries other than their own, again, several initiatives have been undertaken to foster coordination (cf. Neunreither 2006). The first, and probably best known, example of such an initiative is the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC), which for the first time took place in November 1989 and where, since then, delegations from national parliaments and the EP meet on a bi-annual basis to discuss important European topics.

Especially during the last few years, several additional forms of inter-parliamentary meetings have evolved. First, there are 'Joint Parliamentary Meetings' that take place in Brussels and usually focus on broader themes, like the 'Lisbon Agenda' or 'Climate Change'. The second category is meetings at the level of parliamentary committees like 'Joint Committee Meetings' or 'Inter-parliamentary Committee Meetings'. These meetings take place either in Brussels or in the national parliament of the country holding the Presidency and usually focus on more concrete policy dossiers or discuss the plans of the Presidency for the upcoming months.

70 per cent of the MEPs indicated that they have joined more than one inter-parliamentary meeting with national parliaments during the last legislative term. Another 14 per cent reported that they had done so once. The remaining 16 per cent did not engage in any official form of multilateral inter-parliamentary cooperation. As the EP's participation in COSAC-meetings (like for NPs) is formally restricted to six representatives and as COSAC meetings take place only twice a year, these figures suggest that inter-parliamentary meetings at the level of plenary or committee serve as important inter-parliamentary meeting places.

Informal contacts

Again, of course, official gatherings provide only one channel for inter-parliamentary coordination. Just like when looking at the coordination of MEPs with the national parliament of their own country, a lot of coordination may take place informally between party-colleagues (e.g. in the context of European party federations) rather than between parliaments. However, our findings suggest that, beyond official inter-parliamentary meetings, most MEPs only infrequently maintain contact with parliamentarians from other member states (Table 5). Around a quarter of them have monthly contacts of the kind, but for the majority of them such contacts are rather rare. This suggests a kind of division of labour within the European Parliament where each national delegation is responsible for the contacts with its own national parliament, rather than the active maintenance of cross-national, inter-parliamentary links.

Looking at where and how contacts with parliamentarians from other EU member states take place, we find that they are greatly facilitated by formal gatherings (Table 6). Notably, with contacts being much less frequent than those with national colleagues, telephone and e-mail play a much smaller role. Instead the premier site for such meetings is in Brussels or at the EP (71 per cent), followed by meetings in parliaments in other member states. With 37 per cent, also meetings of European

party federations play an important role (40 per cent if only MEPs who belong to an EP party group are taken into account) (cf. Neunreither 2006: 171f.).

Table 5: Informal contacts with national parliamentarians from other member states

	MEPs
Once a week or more	6 %
Once a month	20 %
1-4 times per year	44 %
Less frequently	30 %
Total	100 %

Table 6: Locus of contacts with national parliamentarians from other member states

	MEPs
Brussels/EP	71 %
National parliaments in other member states	50 %
Party Federation	37 %
Without meeting face to face (phone/e-mail)	29 %

Multiple answers possible, hence percentages sum up to more than 100 per cent.

When engaging in inter-parliamentary cooperation, nearly two thirds of the MEPs (63 per cent) report that they mainly cooperate with MPs that belong to their own party family. Hence, like coordination between MEPs and their national parliamentarians, also transnational inter-parliamentary coordination to a large extent proceeds along party-ideological lines.

Looking for differences in trans-European coordination, we again find that members of the Social-Democratic party-group seem to be somewhat more active than those of other party-groups. Thus 89 per cent of the PES respondents participated in inter-parliamentary meetings (against the overall average of 70 per cent) and also only 11 per cent of them would not even have one informal contact with a parliamentarian from another member states (against the overall average of 30 per cent). While, obviously, these results have to be handled with caution, they do hint at the possibility that Social-Democratic MEPs are more active overall in coordinating their activities with other national parliamentarians than their colleagues from other party-groups.

Finally, we asked the MEPs to name countries with which they have been in contact more often than with others. Unfortunately, the limited number of respondents does not allow us to conduct a comprehensive 'network analysis' or to look for certain patterns of coordination between different European parliaments. However, mentioned most often by far were the big old member states: Germany (mentioned by 14 MEPS from 10 different member states), France (13 MEPs/6 MS), and the United Kingdom (11 MEPs/9 MS).

Discussion and conclusion

One thing that our study demonstrates is that inter-parliamentary contacts in the EU can be maintained in many different fora and forms. Once one considers this whole

range, there is actually a considerable amount of inter-parliamentary coordination taking place. At the same time, MEPs can hardly be said to connect to the whole 'field'. Instead, we find that the inter-parliamentary relations that are maintained are clearly structured: prioritising first the own national party, then parliamentarians of one's own nationality or party family, and only incidentally reaching out beyond these 'kin groups'.

As expected, inter-parliamentary coordination does not follow exclusively the channel of institutionalised possibilities for meetings on the level of parliaments. Rather, the party dimension adds an important additional channel for coordination. In fact, intra-party contacts between MEPs and their national parties tend to be rather frequent and seem to account for the major part of coordination actually going on between parliaments.

Looking at the function of inter-parliamentary coordination, our results suggest that the relationship between MEPs and their parties in the national parliaments is still primarily one of information and deliberation rather than one of control (cf. Raunio 2000: 221). While parties only seldom instruct their representatives in the EP on how to vote, the information and the different views provided by MEPs seem to have an impact on their party's positions quite regularly. Still, while we find a considerable amount of interactions going on, at least in the view of the MEPs themselves, coordination is still far from perfect. Indeed, the majority of MEPs think that their national party generally pays too little attention to the processes of decision-making going on at the European level. Thus, instead of suffering from too much control from their national 'principals', most MEPs would prefer more attention of their parties to their work and to coordination in general.

Finally, our results suggest that the amount and the substance of coordination, as well as the attention that national parliamentarians pay to EU decision-making in general, varies within parliaments, between party families. In comparison to the EP averages, and in particular in comparison with their colleagues from the EPP-ED group, Social-Democratic MEPs more often coordinate their activities with their national party as well as with sister parties from other member states. Also, coordination seems more systematic within Social-Democratic parties, and Social-Democratic MEPs seem to have a higher standing within their parties when it comes to developing a position on European issues. Notably, however, despite these signs of a relatively strong engagement, Social-Democratic MEPs are more inclined to be dissatisfied with the low level of attention for EP politics from their national party than the average MEP.

As said, our findings and especially the ones concerning variations between party families cannot be treated as definitive findings. Overall, our survey suffers from a relatively small size of our sample which, most importantly, does not allow us to statistically ascertain the significance of the differences we find. Also, the small sample does not allow us to control for other factors that may explain the variation we have found. Still, in light of the range of institutional initiatives to facilitate inter-parliamentary relations and the little empirical knowledge we have of actual inter-parliamentary behaviour, the findings of these survey can serve a useful explorative function in suggesting hypotheses that can be tested in future, more in-depth, studies. In any case, our findings strongly suggest that research on the role of parliaments in EU decision-making should not treat parliaments as unitary actors but instead look

more closely at parties as the main actors within parliaments and at how EU integration affects their standing and power relations vis-à-vis each other.

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Appendix I: Administration of the survey

The survey contained 15 multiple-choice questions (plus sub-questions), with some providing for additional open comments. While MEPs were guaranteed absolute anonymity, the questionnaires themselves were personalised to allow us to combine the answers given later with background data about the MEPs themselves (e.g. regarding their former career, their party affiliation, etc.).

The survey was conducted in two rounds. The first round took the form of a web survey using the program 'eXamine'. On 7 October 2008, every MEP received a personalised invitation via E-Mail. This mail contained (a) a brief description of the survey, (b) a link to a more extended description of the overall project, (c) a link to a print-out version of the survey, which could be returned via fax or (e-) mail, and (d) a link to the online questionnaire itself. The language of the invitation mail was French and German for those MEPs whose mother tongue was one of these languages and English for all other MEPs. All other documents as well as the questionnaire itself were provided in all three EU working languages. During the next two months (on 27 October and 2 December 2008), two reminders were sent out.

Up and until March 2009, 66 MEPs clicked on the link and started the online survey. 38 of them finished the questionnaire and/or answered at least as many questions that they could be included into the data-set. Together with six MEPs who returned a print-out of the questionnaire, this adds up to a total of 44 respondents for the first round. Another 37 MEPs informed us that, for one or the other reason, they do not want to participate.

A second round was started early April 2009, as all MEPs that had not yet reacted were approached through regular mail. This letter contained a cover letter, a description of the project, the questionnaire and a (stamped) return envelope. The language of all documents again was French or German for MEPs whose mother language was one of the two languages and English for all other MEPs. The English version, however, contained a link to project descriptions and questionnaires in French and German. Again, MEPs were guaranteed absolute anonymity but this time they were asked to put their name on the cover sheet of the questionnaire for organisational reasons. Until August 2009, we received 40 replies, either per fax or mail. Five questionnaires were returned in a way that did not allow us to trace them back to a specific MEP.

Appendix II: Response Analysis

In sum, 84 of the 785 MEPs replied, which left us with a response rate of 10.7 per cent (9.9 per cent if anonymous replies are excluded).

Table A1 Response by Country

	In survey	EP 2004-2009	Share
BE	7	24	29.2 %
DK	6	14	42.9 %
GE	12	99	12.1 %
GR	1	24	4.2 %
ESP	1	54	1.8 %
FR	8	78	10.2 %
IRL	0	13	0.0 %
IT	4	78	5.1 %
NL	6	27	22.2 %
UK	6	78	7.7 %
POR	4	24	16.6 %
AUT	4	18	22.2 %
FIN	2	14	14.3 %
SV	2	19	10.5 %
BUL	3	18	16.6 %
CZECH	4	24	16.6 %
EST	0	6	0.0 %
HUNG	3	24	12.5 %
LAT	1	9	11.1 %
LITH	0	13	0.0 %
POL	0	54	0.0 %
ROM	3	35	8.6 %
SLOVAK	0	14	0.0 %
SLOVEN	1	7	14.3 %
MALTA	1	5	20.0 %
LUX	0	6	0.0 %
CYP	0	6	0.0 %
Total	79	785	9.9 %
Anonymous	5		
Total	84	785	10.7 %

Looking at the member states the respondents came from (table A1), it shows that Denmark had the highest response rate (42.9 percent). The highest number of replies in absolute terms we received from Germany (12 respondents). For seven member states (IRL, EST, LITH, POL, SLOVAK, LUX, CYP), no MEP replied. Comparing different groups of countries shows that 'new' member states (i.e. member states that joined the EU in 2004 or later) are somewhat underrepresented (20.5 percent of the sample while accounting for 27.3 percent of all MEPs). Even stronger underrepresented are the four 'southern' member states – Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal – (12.8 per cent instead of 22.9 per cent). As a consequence, the sample is biased towards 'northern' and 'old' EU member states (67.9 per cent instead of 48.9 per cent).

Table A2: Response by Party-Group

	In survey	EP 2004-2009	Share
EPP-ED	31	288	10.8 %
PES	19	217	8.7 %
ALDE	10	100	10.0 %
UEN	3	44	6.8 %
Greens-EFA	6	43	14.0 %
GUE-NGL	1	41	2.4 %
ID	2	22	9.1 %
Non-attached	7	30	23.3 %
Total	79	785	10.1 %
Anonymous	5		
Total	84	785	10.7 %

In terms of affiliation to EP party groups, table A2 shows that non-attached MEPs are somewhat overrepresented in the sample, although their absolute number remains relatively low. Of the seven EP groups, GUE-NL is clearly and PES and UEN are somewhat underrepresented, while the Greens-EFA group is overrepresented.

Looking at national party affiliations, the 79 MEPs for whom their identity could be reconstructed were members of 59 different parties. A slim majority of respondents (53 per cent) was a member of a party that on 1 October 2007 was part of the government on the national level. Six of the 84 respondents (i.e. including anonymous replies) were member of a party that at the time the questionnaire was filled out was not represented in the member states' national parliament.

Looking at individual MEPs, the share of women in the sample is 26.6 per cent compared to a 31 per cent overall share in the sixth EP (2004-2009). On average, the respondents in 2008 had spent 7.9 years in the EP at the time the survey was conducted (interruptions/re-entries taken into consideration).

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