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## Parties' Transnational Coordination in the EU after Lisbon

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## **General Conclusion**

The main finding of this dissertation is the rather limited level of effective coordination between national parties that belong to the same party 'family' in the EU. This finding is explained by the parties' general lack of attention to the EU-level of politics and the limited genuine interest party politicians have in EU politics. This is particularly striking in regards to the transnational party federations.

What do these findings entail with respect to the normative debate on the EU's democratic legitimacy and the quality of the democratic representation at the EU level of governance? Mainly, these findings illustrate the wide gap between the legal framework of the Europarties and the reality observed. The 1992 Maastricht treaty announced that 'political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.' (Article 10 (4), TEU). However, neither this formal acknowledgement of the Europarties' democratic function in the EU, nor the legal and organisational developments since 2004 tell us much about the reality of these organisations, their function of linkage with citizens across the EU or their visibility and political relevance at the constituency level. In fact, the findings suggest that Europarties' effective contribution to 'forming European political awareness' is rather modest. Legal arrangements are not sufficient to transform the EU into a genuine democratic polity and for bringing citizens closer to the EU institutions. No conceivable remedies can successfully address the major problem of the EU's remoteness from its citizens if these remedies remain confined to the EU level of governance.

## **Outside the European Parliament**

National parties may coordinate activities outside the EP institutional setting, notably the EP elections campaign every five years. However, as the case-study on how the French Greens used the 2009 EP elections illustrates, an effective coordination between national parties and other parties or the extra-parliamentary wing of their Europarty was not observed. National parties are fully autonomous to determine their own electoral strategies in the EP campaign, according to their own strategic goals, which are determined primarily at the national level of politics.

In addition, the transnational party federations try to reach out directly to citizens across the EU by establishing individual membership schemes, in order to develop certain autonomous resources and organisational capacities. As the in-depth case study on the EGP illustrates, these attempts are hampered by the national parties' lack of interest or even reluctance to implement the

Europarties' decisions and policies as well as the lack of interest among party members.

My conclusion from these two case-studies is that the Europarties' extra-parliamentary wings, the transnational party federations, have limited potential to develop into genuine transnational party organisations in the current EU institutional setting. Hence, as pessimistic Europarty scholars had already suggested (Delwit et al. 2001; Bartolini 2012), my findings confirm that these organisations are merely loose umbrella organisations at the EU-level. It is therefore rather problematic to study them as the party-in-central-office element of a transnational party organisation.

The Europarties we study today are, in fact, political groups in the EP, which have developed since the 1950s within the EP arena, largely confined to the EU institutional setting. The institutional recognition of these organisations as 'political parties' first appeared in the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht, following demands from the EP groups themselves, notably the two largest ones, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats (Johansson and Raunio 2005; Roa Bastos 2012). Notably since the 2004 Europarties regulations, the European Commission and the EP develop policies to empower the Europarties through legal and financial means. The idea behind these policies is that such organisations provide the EU with popular democratic legitimacy, notably by mobilizing citizens in EP elections. Europarties, despite their often relatively resourceful member organisations across the EU, are still financially dependent on the EP annual grants. The actual discussions in the EP on how to better control these grants<sup>1</sup> seem like a text-book case on how legislators decide upon the rules of the game in which they are the most interested players (Katz and Mair 1995).

Scholars who study Europarties tend to follow the provisions in EU law, looking at Europarties as political parties. However, empirics suggest that the extra-parliamentary wings of the EP groups are merely Brussels-based NGOs, with only a handful of staffers, with their offices just outside the EP premises, heavily financed by the EP itself (see Calossi 2014). In fact, the organisational life of these NGOs more resembles EU interest-groups than political parties. The claim of these small umbrella organisations to be 'political parties at the European level' is highly questionable.

An alternative to study Europarties as political parties may be to study these organisations as EU interest-groups, comparing their organisational structures, notably financially speaking, to other interest-groups which are heavily financed and politically supported by the European Commission<sup>2</sup>. In this case, Europarties may be analysed as umbrella interest-groups, while the member organisations are the ones who, in principle, set the lobbying agenda. Arguably, the hypothesis is

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1 See Palmeri, Tara (2016) 'Top MEPs seek to starve fringe parties of funding', *Politico*, 7 June 2016. The article reveals a new report drawn up by the EP Secretary General, Klaus Welle, on the misuse of Europarties' funding.

2 The works of Justin Greenwood on this topic may be a promising research avenue.

that parties lobby the EU institutions and EU governments on legislation and policies relevant to their own party organisations, mainly the legal and financial framework of EP elections and referendums related to EU matters. Such a research avenue would still keep the focus on the existing organisations which are officially recognised by EU law and the top-down policies which assist them legally, financially and politically. As such, it would be in line with the pessimistic approach towards the possible emergence of parties at the European level.

A possible optimistic alternative would be to consider that 'political parties at the European level' may eventually emerge but outside the EP institutional setting, in bottom-up dynamics in European civil society. In this case, such new European parties would not be part of the actual parties' cartel (Mair 1994; Katz and Mair 1995) but a genuinely new organisation with its own autonomous financial resources and support in civil society, possibly by individual party members across Europe. In this case, the three-faces of party organisation may not be the best model to use, but rather the literature on how new parties emerge and on the new models of parties.

### **Within the European Parliament**

While Europarties seem to be unable to effectively perform a representative role at the EU level of politics, they do fulfil a certain procedural (or institutional) function of political parties (Bartolini and Mair 2001) at the EU level of politics, notably in the organisation and maintenance of the EP offices. Europarties as EP groups have a crucial role in the organisation of the EP, its committees, decision-making process and voting behaviour of MEPs. In fact, the main reason why national parties in the EU do coordinate transnationally intensively and on a daily basis is that their delegations in the EP are organised within transnational parliamentary groups together with other parties from different member states.

Taking into account their crucial function in the EP, Europarties may be analysed as networks of legislators (Slaughter 2004) by which these actors reach out beyond national borders, encounter their foreign counterparts and create various horizontal and vertical networks. Since Europarties are composed of representatives who are directly elected by the EU citizens, these European networks of legislators are well positioned to embrace the voice of the people at the international level (See Slaughter 2004: 104-130).

However, as I have shown in the third article of this dissertation, when EP groups try to reach a common policy position and assume a role in a sensitive policy issue on which they have substantial disagreements, this possibility is largely dependent on the political will of the national parties affiliated with the EP group. Moreover, despite their empowerment in the past few decades, Europarties still suffer from resource scarcity, especially when compared to well-established

national parties in large EU member states. Hence, while Europarties may have a particular normative role at the European and the international level (Šabič 2013), we still face a major problem how to measure the impact or influence of these organisations and therefore to assess their over-all relevance in European politics beyond their procedural function in the EP institutional arena.

EP group affiliation seem rather irrelevant when explaining variation in MEPs' practices in their national parliaments, which is linked to the EU Member State in which they were elected, as I have demonstrated in the fourth article of the dissertation. The large variation of MEPs' practices in their national parliaments across the EU is explained, by and large, by the variation in the national parliaments' MEPs' participation rights in the chambers.

The main weakness of the Europarties is that national parties' delegations in the EP enjoy almost exclusive autonomy and are free to opt-out of their EP group's decisions. The potential role of EP groups as genuine political actors, relevant and visible also outside the EP arena, is challenged by disagreements between national delegations within these groups. In case of conflict over salient policy issues between an EP group and a national delegation affiliated with it, MEPs generally choose to vote according to the national party's position and not along the political line of their affiliated EP group (Hix 2002; Scully et al. 2012; Roger and Winzen 2015). These so-called 'internal' divisions within EP groups are, in fact, *international* divisions between different national parties of the same party 'family'. Therefore, the so-called 'transnational' or 'supranational' EP groups are, in fact, *international* organisations, in which the national parties, via their delegations in the EP, play a crucial role. It is therefore problematic to study Europarties' parliamentary components, the EP groups, as autonomous actors, as transnational or supranational organisations, beyond their international structure. EP groups are composed of national party delegations and remain largely dominated by these national components. Therefore, similar to transnational party federations, EP groups should also be analysed as umbrella organisations or an alliance of various parliamentary groups.

Future research on the parliamentary groups in the EP (EP groups) will benefit from taking some critical distance from the comparative politics approach (Bowler and McElroy 2015), which became rather dominant in the study of these parliamentary groups since the late 1990s (Hix 1994, 1998). An international relations approach, which takes into account the predominant role of the national delegations in the EP and the decisive role of domestic politics in their resources, norms of appropriateness and practices, may actually fit the reality of the EP groups better than analysing them as parliamentary groups similar to the ones observable in national legislatures.

Research on EP groups should examine more closely the question how they coordinate with the parliamentary party groups of the same political 'family' in the national parliaments across the

EU. The question is not only how do parties' delegations of the same 'family' reach common policy positions in the EP institutional setting, but also what impact these common positions have outside the EP arena, on the national parties across the EU. Thus, the focus is not on organisational units but on cross-level dynamics between national parliamentary party groups and their affiliated EP groups.

One way to analyse these dynamics is as two-level games, based on Robert Putnam's model of international negotiations (1988). Putnam's model highlights the entanglement between the political bargaining processes taking place simultaneously in the international and domestic arenas. When adapted to the EU, Putnam's original two-level game model has been expanded to consider three arenas (Patterson 1997; Collinson 1999; Frennhoff 2007; Reslow and Vink 2015): the international arena (level I) between the Commission and a third country or an international organisation; the intra-EU arena (level II) of negotiations between the representatives of the EU member states in the Council, including negotiations between and within the principal EU institutions; and the domestic/national dynamics (level III) within the EU member states, including domestic or sectoral interest groups. In these adaptations of Putnam's model to the EU, the EP has received only limited attention, merely as one of the elements of intra-EU dynamics at level II.

Within EP groups, I observe the logic of two-level games, in which negotiations take place simultaneously in two rather distinct arenas of party politics: the international arena of the EP group (level I) and the domestic arena of the national parties (level II). In this model, MEPs and staff of the national parties' delegations are the chief negotiators, being the main link between these two arenas. These negotiations are international in nature since they occur between national party organisations via their delegates. Moreover, the outcome of these negotiations is mainly determined by the national delegations' size within the EP group (Klüver and Rodon 2013).

The logic of the two-level games played by EP groups entails that domestic dynamics determine the stances of the national parties on given EU issues (level II). In turn, the national party tries to upload its position to the international arena, via bargaining with other delegations in the EP group it is affiliated with (level I). The two-level games model in international negotiations requires finding a balance between domestic demands and the chief negotiators' capacity to compromise at the international arena. In other words, the chief negotiator in the international arena seeks to reach an agreement that will be accepted at the national level. Once an agreement has been reached in the international negotiations, a phase of formal or informal ratification follows. In practice, the need to ratify the agreement at the national level already produces significant anticipation effects during the international negotiations (Putnam 1988: 436) as well as prior consultations and bargaining at the domestic level in order to determine the chief negotiators' positions at the international arena.

Putnam's model may be a useful analytical tool to better comprehend the vertical dynamics between EP groups and their affiliated parties. Using such a model turns the focus of research from

the EP arena itself to incorporate also the national level of politics, taking into account how the delegations face domestic demands and pressures from the party's constituents and interest-groups. A possible operationalisation of this model in empirical research may be a detailed case-study on a particularly salient policy issue in a comparative perspective, providing an in-depth analysis of the 'win-set' of a few parties' delegations in the EP in regards to their constituency, and how these delegations negotiate the EP groups' common positions.

## **Concluding remarks**

In the introduction I presented the current state of the art, first on national parties in the EU and then on Europarties. EU scholars, such as myself, are very much focused on the EU level of politics and its institutional development. We follow closely this fascinating moving target in Brussels, and very often tend to see the EU as an emerging polity. However, a comprehensive understanding of the transnational coordination of parties in the EU should strive to go beyond this dichotomy between national parties and the Europarty organisational structures. Future research should tackle the question to what extent national parties cooperate with their affiliated Europarty. We need to incorporate in our research strategy both levels of governance and the vertical interactions that occur between the Europarties and their national components.

In the introduction to this dissertation I reflected on two challenges I identified in conducting this research: mainstreaming political sociology in the field of EU studies and taking into account both the EU-level and the national level of politics. The latter is an on-going challenge I still face, both conceptually and empirically; how to study a political system composed of 28 different member states, with their different institutional settings, historical contexts and political cultures. As for the former challenge, mainstreaming political sociology in the field of EU studies, this is not a simple missionary task of diffusing the sociological approaches among the mainstream literature. The challenge as I see it now is rather how to build bridges between sociological and institutional approaches in EU studies, which complement one another, and how to take into full consideration in the research both the EU law with its formal institutional procedures and the actors' usages or non-usages of these legal provisions.