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Political Parties in the EU: What's Next?

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Abstract

Political Parties at the European level (Europarties) have traditionally been regarded as weak actors in the EU political system. Yet, this assessment fails to correctly describe the role that the Europarties play in different arenas. The parliamentary parties are responsible to organize the workings of the European Parliament (EP) and have developed strong organizational structures over time. In contrast, the Europarties remain weak in the electoral arena, and in performing a linkage function connecting the EU citizens and institutions. Thus, this article presents the ‘state of the art’ on Europarties and discusses a number of reforms which could strengthen the role of the extra-parliamentary parties as ‘representative’ actors. It argues that the role that the Europarties play in the Union today would have been unimaginable only a decade ago. Yet, the average European citizen is still hardly aware of their existence. Some reforms or political actions – such as recognizing individual membership, or sponsoring Citizens’ Initiatives – could strengthen their visibility and enhance their status in-between the rounds of EP elections.

Key-words

Europarties, democracy, European Parliament, 2014 EP elections, reform



1. Introduction

If in national political systems political parties are going through a phase of transformation and possibly decline (Daalder 2003; Enyedi 2014), in European Union (EU) politics political parties are, instead, among the emerging actors. They have recently been further institutionalized through the formal recognition made by the Treaty of Lisbon (in its art. 10.4 TEU); they have been allocated considerable financial resources from the EU budget (more than 20 million euros in 2013)¹ and they have a key role in organizing the working of the European Parliament (EP). Yet, their activity and role is not very visible to the European citizens who, in the EP elections – classically defined as “second-order” elections (Reif & Schmitt 1980; Schmitt 2005) – vote for national parties, on the bases of national regulations, and with campaigns dominated by national issues.

How could we explain the fact that political parties at the EU level (in brief: Europarties) are more and more important in Brussels, but are hardly visible in the member states of the Union? What opportunities, and what constraints, exist for political parties in the EU political system? What institutional reforms and political innovations are currently being discussed by the EU policy-makers to strengthen the Europarties? While the EU – and some of its Southern member states in particular – are torn by the Eurocrisis, and macro-economic and budgetary decisions are increasingly taken outside the national boundaries, the issue of the legitimacy of the EU has gained even more importance. In this context, the future of the Europarties, and their prospects beyond the 2014 EP elections, might be crucial to address the ‘democratic deficit’ of the Union.

In order to address these questions, I will first describe the historical development of the Europarties, focusing on the emergence and consolidation of the (strong) parliamentary parties and the (weak) extra-parliamentary parties. I will then explore what opportunities exist today for the Europarties in the EU, while national parties are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy, and the EU is plague by both its ‘democratic deficit’ and the economic crisis. I will then analyze the role of the Europarties in EU decision-making, and a number of reforms meant to strengthen their linkage function and role in the electoral arena.



2. Europarties: Change and Development

From an organizational perspective, the Europarties exist both as political groups inside the EP and as extra-parliamentary parties with headquarters (generally) in Brussels. The development of the two EU-organizational faces of the Europarties has followed different trajectories and has confronted itself with diverse institutional and environmental (dis)incentives. On the one hand, the political groups are the key actors in the EP, whose organization and functioning depends on its political parties. On the other hand, the organizational development of the extra-parliamentary parties has been much slower and uncertain, and they have played a very marginal role in the electoral arena. How could this difference be accounted for?

The organizational consolidation of the political groups has come in response to the legislative empowerment of the EP (Kreppel 2002). Up to the Single European Act (1987), the EP was only consulted in the making of legislation, and decisions were taken by the Council of Ministers. With the cooperation procedure and, most importantly, with the co-decision procedure – introduced at Maastricht (1992) and ‘strengthened’ with the Treaties of Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2001) – the EP was given equal legislative powers to the Council in more and more policy areas. To the legislative empowerment of the EP, the groups have reacted by consolidating their organizational structures. When the EP was only consulted by the Council, the voting choices of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were inconsequential. As the EP obtained equal powers to the Council, however, the political groups’ role in ensuring the voting cohesion of their members has grown in importance (Hix *et al.* 2007). Cohesive groups became necessary for the formation of the required majorities in the EP and for the EP to be more successful in the legislative bargaining with the Council.

The very important role of political parties *inside* the parliamentary arena is not matched by anything comparable in the electoral arena. Indeed, to the relevance of the political groups corresponds the very weak role of the extra-parliamentary parties in the EP elections and, more generally, in the linkage between the citizens and institutions of the EU. This observation, empirically driven, stands in contrast with the formal letter of the Treaty of Lisbon which, in its art. 10.1, indicates that the Union is founded on “representative democracy” and attributes to its political parties the function to “forming



European political awareness” and “expressing the will of citizens of the Union” (art. 10.4). Despite some steps in the direction of a stronger consolidation, the disincentives to the institutionalization of Europarties outside the parliamentary arena are still important.

When the early federations, or confederations, of national parties began to be constituted in the then Economic Community in the mid-1970s, a strong pulling factor were the first direct elections to the EP to be held in 1979. It was a widely shared expectation that the federations could draft a common manifesto among the member parties in the nine member states, and lead a common transnational campaign, based on European issues. Yet, these expectations were based on normative ideals, and clashed against the empirical reality. In the EU “second-order elections” (Reif and Schmitt 1980) national, rather than European, issues were the salient ones; participation was lower than in ‘first-order’ elections and these elections were used as a test for the popularity of the government of the day. In the EP ‘second-order’ elections, the key actors were (and remain) the national parties, which are responsible (rather than the Europarties) to select candidates and define the composition of the electoral list.

The disappointment which followed the first direct elections was responsible for a protracted moment of stasis in the development of the Europarties, lasting throughout the 1980s. In the early 1990s, however, there was a surprising resurgence in the interest for the Europarties, due to the enthusiasm for the new European Union, the construction of the Economic and Monetary Union and a new integrationist momentum. With the new art. 138A, Europarties were for the first time mentioned in the Treaties. Thus, the old ‘federations’ changed their names, becoming – formally, at least – ‘parties’ and reformed their statutes and regulations (see Hix and Lord 1997). Finally, in the early 2000s, the extra-parliamentary parties started to receive money from the EU budget with Regulation 2004/2003.¹¹ With public funding, the extra-parliamentary parties became more autonomous from the political groups (which were, formerly, responsible for the financing and the logistic assistance to the extra-parliamentary parties) and were able to hire more staff and move to new headquarters.

Yet, despite a growing organizational consolidation, the visibility of the extra-parliamentary parties beyond Brussels remains low. The last round of EP elections – despite the innovation produced by the presence of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (see, for details, below) – confirmed that they are, essentially, still national elections. Intra-party divisions



and the low salience of EU-wide issues for the national electorates tend to produce national campaigns. Some years ago, it was hypothesized that the EU was “ripe for politicization” (Van der Eijk e Franklin 2004). Even after the crisis, however, the main division on the EU is between mainstream, pro-European parties and fringe, Eurosceptic parties. What has emerged is an alternative ‘for’ or ‘against’ the EU, rather than different policy agendas for the EU (see also Mair 2007).

3. The Crisis of National Parties and New Opportunities for the Europarties

It may seem paradoxical to imagine a consolidation of political parties at the EU level when political parties are certainly not in their heyday in national politics. In the Italian case, political parties are the least trusted institutions in citizens’ opinion but, more generally, parties struggle everywhere to pursue the tasks they have traditionally been attributed (see Dalton and Weldon 2005). Thus, it is in decline their socialization capacity, with a more and more limited membership and a weaker presence on the ‘ground’; their role in selecting the political class is challenged; they are losing ground as agents of representation, with problems both on the supply-side (i.e. the end of ideologies) and on the demand-side (i.e. the fragmentation of the electoral body). Moreover, parties appear not to make a difference on what public policies are pursued. Political agendas are often determined outside the national borders and do not necessarily reflect citizens’ preferences. It would suffice here to think about the role of European Central Bank or the European Commission in countries like Greece, Italy or Ireland in the context of the Eurocrisis (Mair 2014).

Yet, it could be the crisis of the national parties to provide, ironically, a more favourable context for the Europarties. Indeed, if key decisions on economic, monetary, environmental, budgetary policies and so on are now taken at the EU level, a meaningful representative channel needs to be structured at that very level. The traditional channels of accountability are insufficient when key decisions are taken outside the national borders. Moreover, it is not only in the light of representation and accountability – that is to say: democracy – that a stronger role for the Europarties could be advocated. The national parties themselves could (re-)gain a role in the making of public policies by strengthening their cooperation at the EU-level with like-minded parties (also Hix 2008a). It could then



be advantageous to the national parties themselves to reinforce transnational party linkages.

Yet, while in the member states of the EU there exists a system of party government, in which the support of the legislature, and that of a partisan majority (of a single party, or a coalition of parties) is needed for the survival of the government, this is not the case for the EU. In the EU political system, the executive and the legislature are independent, and the former can be dismissed by the latter only for cases which closely resemble the impeachment of the US President. Furthermore, another fundamental difference between the EU and the parliamentary systems of the member states is that in the latter there are (normally) clear government/opposition dynamics, while in the EU different coalitions form in the EP depending on the policy content of the vote (see Fabbrini 2010). Furthermore, the ‘fate’ of the executive is never linked to the outcome of a parliamentary vote. Arguably, the 2014 EP elections and the indirect vote for a candidate-President of the European Commission – chosen by the Europarties – have moved the EU political system closer to the parliamentary model. Yet, while the nomination of the President of the Commission has changed with the Treaty of Lisbon (more below), that of individual commissioners and the collegial vote of censure have not.

Nonetheless, the absence of party government does not automatically imply the irrelevance of political parties. It has even been argued that, as parties are no longer asked to govern, they could better perform a representative function (Mair and Thomassen 2010). In other words, when the legislature and the executive are autonomous, the parties in parliament could better concentrate on the content of public policies: indeed, the classic example of a ‘law-making’ parliament is the American Congress, while in fused power systems (such as the Westminster system in Britain) it is the government to make most legislation (Kreppel 2013).

In a parliamentary EU, the EP is thus likely to play a lesser role than it has played until now. Yet, whatever institutional model is embraced by the EU, the issue remains that, if the EU has to overcome its legitimacy problems, the distance between the EU institutions and its citizens needs to be reduced. As in domestic political system, it is doubtful that any organization different from political parties could effectively perform a linkage function (see, classically, Schattschneider 1942; Sartori 1976). For the representative process to work, citizens should be able to upload their preferences to the governing institutions via political parties (the inputs of the system), while political parties should be able to pursue



public policies in line with citizens' preferences (the outputs of the system). In what follows, I will assess what is the role of the Europarties in relation to both the outputs and the inputs of the EU political system.

4. Do Europarties Matter?

For a long time, it has been common knowledge that Europarties would be irrelevant for integration. For intergovernmentalists, the key forces behind integration were (and are) the member states, while neo-functionalists focus their attention mostly on supranational institutions like the European Commission and the European Court of Justice. Of course, from Ernst Haas (1958) to David Marquand (1978), the idea of a “Europe of parties” was occasionally raised. Yet, political parties remained secondary actors (to say the least) in integration theory, and with some reason. As it was argued above, beyond the EP their role has traditionally been minimal, and the Europarties often defied the (high) expectations that observers placed upon them (i.e. their dismal performance in the EP election campaigns). More recently, however, there has been a resurgence in the academic interest for the Europarties, with studies leaving aside more general theoretical discussions on their role in the EU, but aiming at empirically capturing their ‘impact’ (if any) in the EU political system and, specifically, on its policy-making. The main finding of this literature is that the Europarties “matter” – to some extent, at least – and that they make some contribution to the EU policy process.

Obviously, political parties “matter” inside the EP. In what ways, specifically? After twenty years of more and more sophisticated empirical studies, some points have been established. First, the political groups have at their disposal some instruments to control their members, and make use of them (for all, Hix *et al.* 2007). The groups' leadership has some ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’ at its disposal to control MEPs – even if it does not dispose of the strongest sanctioning instrument (exclude a member from the electoral list, which is controlled by the national member parties). Thus, it has been demonstrated that those MEPs with more distant preferences from the group average obtain a lower number of legislative reports (Yordanova 2011), while the least loyal deputies (as shown by roll-call votes) are rarely selected as rapporteurs, in particular when the ordinary legislative procedure applies (Yoshinaka *et al.* 2010). On the bases of a more anecdotal evidence, the



group leadership makes use of the allocation of inter-parliamentary delegations, funds for events and round-tables, and the distribution of internal posts in the group to reward the most loyal and active members (in general, see Kreppel 2002).

In order to influence the policy position of the EP, and to enhance its role in inter-institutional bargaining, the political groups need to be cohesive. Voting cohesion results ‘naturally’ high when the groups’ members are homogenous in their ideological preferences. Because of the EU’s enlargements, however, and in particular after the 2004/07 enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe, the political groups have considerably expanded and the new members have not always ‘fit in’ neatly in terms of ideology (Bressanelli 2012).

However, despite 12 new members joining the EU, the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement has not only failed to negatively affect the voting cohesion of the groups (Voeten 2009), but it has also produced a further consolidation of their organizations (Bressanelli 2014). The need to maintain the capacity to perform, in a very different environment with much higher transaction and coordination costs, has pushed the political groups to adapt their organizational structures, attributing more powers to their leaders and creating new institutional structures to forge intra-group consensus and smothering down internal dissent. This is especially true for the larger and more diverse political groups, which are also (quite surprisingly) the most cohesive (Hix *et al.* 2007).

Policy-seeking political groups have therefore adapted to a changing environment – where the EP has gained stronger legislative competences Treaty reform after Treaty reform – by strengthening their organizations. Yet, as the EU decision-making process does not end in the EP, there are other actors and arenas which the Europarties could seek to influence. In the ordinary legislative procedure, which is now used for about 85-90 percent of legislation, there is a bicameral system constituted by the EP and the Council of Ministers, with the legislative initiative attributed to the European Commission. If the key players in the EP are the political groups, those in the Council are the national ministers, representing the member states. With increasing frequency, and currently in the quasi-totality of the cases, negotiations between the two co-legislators take place behind closed doors, in trilogues also involving the Commission as mediator.

Could the Europarties – and, specifically, the extra-parliamentary parties – play a role in inter-institutional decision-making? The literature shows that the Europarties could be a



factor in the negotiations between the EP and the Council (Lindberg *et al.* 2008). For instance, it has been shown that if the EP rapporteur and the competent minister for the Council Presidency belong to the same party family, then an agreement is more likely to be found (Rasmussen 2007). Furthermore, the smaller the ideological distance between the two co-negotiators, the higher the likelihood to conclude early the negotiations (Reh *et al.* 2013). Moreover, when an informal agreement is concluded, the major Europarties exercise a stronger control on their members in the EP, in order to ensure that the plenary vote formalizes the text which was agreed informally (Bressanelli *et al.* 2014).

Further evidence of the attempt of the Europarties to influence policy-making at the EU level is found observing their organizational adaptation. The major Europarties – the European People’s Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) – have reformed their organization in order to bring together the ministers of their party family belonging to a specific Council formation. Beyond the traditional Europarty Summits bringing together the leaders of the national parties, that are organized ahead of the meetings of the European Council, or the Intergovernmental Conferences reforming the treaties (see Hix and Lord 1997), the major Europarties have also started to organize ministerial meetings. The objective, as the strategic plan of the PES for 2010-14 indicates: “our [...] task is thus to influence EU policies together with social-democrats present in all institutions (MEPs, Commissioners, Ministers)”. Relevant MEPs are also often invited to the ministerial meetings, in order to bring together the most important actors involved in policy-making.

All in all, the capacity of the Europarties to influence the direction of the EU has traditionally been assessed with skepticism. Moreover, the EP itself would be less influential than the Council in shaping the EU legislation (Thomson 2011). Yet, the Europarties are slowly finding their way outside the parliamentary arena, as their emerging role in inter-institutional decision making suggests. There is a life beyond the parliamentary arena, after all. Therefore, the next section reviews some of the reform proposals which are meant to strengthen the extra-parliamentary parties and evaluates what future prospects exist for the Europarties.



5. Four (not so Modest) Reforms

Despite the role of the political groups in the parliamentary arena, and the growing activism of the Europarties in Brussels, the visibility of the Europarties remains weak beyond the Brussels circles. When European citizens are asked whether they are aware of the existence of the Europarties, the number of respondents which answers affirmatively is low (AECR-AMR 2014). In other words, the Europarties live an introverted life in Brussels – in particular, in the EP – but are hardly known to the EU citizens. They are failing, therefore, to act as transmission belts between the European citizens and institutions.

Some observers have pointed out that the absence of a fully-fledged representative *process* would not exclude the possibility of a representative *outcome* at the EU level (Mair and Thomassen 2010). Indeed, if the national parties belonging to the same party family share priorities and objectives, even if the EP elections remain ‘second-order’ elections without a transnational electoral supply, their result could nonetheless produce congruence between the preferences of the voters and the agendas of the political groups. If the left-right dimension is the most important domain of identification in almost all EU member states, both for voters and for parties, the aggregation of national election outcomes would ‘produce’ relatively coherent and diverse Europarties (Thomassen 2009).

Yet, the enduring weakness of the Europarties in the electoral arena has been perceived as a relevant problem for the EU (lack of) legitimacy by both practitioners and academic commentators. In order to tackle this issue, a number of reforms have been suggested, or have recently been implemented in the EU. Some of them are of institutional nature, while others affect the organization of the Europarties. In one way or another, what they have in common is the attempt to give empirical content to art. 10.1 TEU: “the functioning of the EU shall be founded on representative democracy”.

5.1. Individual Membership^{III}

Currently, the Europarties are parties of parties, without rank-and-file members. Recently, however, the debate over providing some form of direct involvement to party activists has gained traction. In general, the extra-parliamentary parties have resisted the direct involvement of ordinary citizens, although they have, at times, devised alternative forms of participation. For instance, the PES has institutionalized the role of ‘party activist’,



participating in electoral campaigning, debating on European politics and making the PES voice heard at the grass-root level. The ALDE has also recently introduced 'associate members', individual members without voting rights. Some form of individual membership – 'supporters' – has also been introduced by the European Greens but, again, without voting rights (Hertner 2013: 145-47).

The falling turnout in the EP elections, together with the relatively large amount of public funding that the extra-parliamentary parties receive, are calling for stronger citizens' involvement in the Europarties' activities. But the introduction of new modes of participation – as for the PES activists, the ALDE associate members or the European Greens (EG) 'supporters' – amounts to little if political decisions (that is, decisions taken by the party Congress or other executive bodies) exclude the rank-and-file members. In this regard, individual membership, with full voting rights, would be a more effective way to strengthen citizens' involvement.

Nonetheless, the arguments for resisting the introduction of individual membership are not trivial. How could individual membership be regulated? Which voting rights would members be granted? It is a widespread fear among the Europarty leaders that individual membership might be used for tactical reasons: what if a party faction uses the channel of individual membership to oppose the official political line of a member party? Would the Europarties be transformed into a battlefield for regulating domestic problems? Taking everything into consideration, then, it is unlikely that individual membership would, in the short-run at least, be introduced. Alternative forms of individual participation, with more limited rights, are for the time being more feasible.

5.2. Legal Status

A new regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties (Regulation 2012/0237) attributes legal personality according to EU law to the Europarties and their associated political foundations.^{IV} As the non-legislative report tabled by MEP Giannokou puts it^V “strengthening European political parties is a means of enhancing participatory governance in the EU and finally strengthening democracy”.^{VI} In order to achieve this goal, the report posits that an important step would be granting legal personality to the Europarties.



Indeed, the legal status of the European political parties – that is to say, of the extra-parliamentary parties – is at present equivalent to any NGOs or pressure group registered in Belgium. They are generally recognized as 'international nonprofit association' by the Belgian law, when their headquarters are based in Brussels. The so-called Europarty Statute (Regulation 2004/2003) failed to grant an EU legal status to the Europarties, making them *de facto* lesser actors in the EU institutional architecture.

The full legal recognition of the Europarties would certainly enhance their status in the EU, besides having obvious advantages, in terms of salary and job security, for their employees. However, it is hard to imagine what more substantial consequences this reform will bring. As a result of its adoption, it seems unrealistic to expect the distance between parties and citizens to be lessened. While granting to the Europarties a stronger status in Brussels might be a task worth pursuing, in order to connect citizens and the EU institutions it is definitely too small a step.

5.3. Transnational List

A proposal tabled by the British Liberal MEP Andrew Duff^{VII} asked for a modification of the 1976 Election Act by introducing a transnational list to be elected in a single EU-wide constituency. 25 additional MEPs were to be chosen from a single list directly managed by the Europarties. Concretely, each European citizen would be granted two votes in the EP elections: a first one for the national or regional party, as it is now, and a second one for the transnational list. In Duff's words, the Europarties would be transformed, by directly managing this list, into "real campaign organizations".

The proposal is fully inscribed into the federalist tradition wishing a single electoral constituency for the whole of Europe. It would certainly represent a breakthrough in the system against the monopoly of the national parties in candidate selection. Furthermore, it would also make the Europarties much more visible to European citizens.

Nonetheless, there were a number of difficulties that made the introduction of a transnational list for the 2014 EP elections impossible. The most important one had to do with the opposition of a large number of MEPs who, backed by their national parties, resisted the setting up of a parallel – albeit limited – channel of recruitment for the parliamentary elites. Ultimately, in July 2011, the Duff proposal was sent back to the



Constitutional Affairs Committee for further consideration, given the high likelihood of rejection in the plenary of the EP.

Moreover, the Duff's proposal prescribes the setting up of a 'closed list', whose management would be a task for the Europarties. However, deciding who will top the list is likely not to be a banal choice. How would the Europarties decide? Would they open a broad consultation with civil society, leave the matter to the Congress (that is, to the member parties), or something else?

The introduction of a transnational list is certainly a brave innovation but, even in the very unlikely case that the EP and the Council would approve it in the future, a number of significant problems will still need to be tackled.

5.4. European Citizens' Initiative

The Lisbon Treaty (art.11.4), drawing literally from the aborted Constitutional Treaty, introduced the so-called 'Citizens' Initiative'. For the first time, citizens of the 28 member states have been given the possibility to directly ask the Commission to initiate legislation on matters where legislative action is considered to be necessary for the purpose of implementing the Treaties. The Citizens' Initiative requires one million of signatures, collected in at least a-quarter of the member states.^{VIII} Once the collection is completed and all formalities are met, the Commission has the obligation to duly consider the initiative and communicate its conclusions and actions it plans to take (if any) within three months. The Commission is not obliged to follow up with a legislative proposal, but needs to motivate its action.

The Regulation disciplining the Initiative states that 'entities, notably organizations which under the Treaties contribute to forming political awareness and to expressing the will of the citizens of the Union, should be able to promote a citizens' initiative' (art. 9 of Regulation 211/2011). Even if the Europarties are not explicitly mentioned by this regulation, the Citizens' Initiative appears to be an important stimulus to promote their engagement with civil society. Indeed, Bouza Garzia and Greenwood commented that 'a measure of formalized organization and resources will be necessary to gather the necessary signatures' (2012: 252) and the Europarties, together with their national member parties, might be able to supply them. The Initiative offers them a concrete possibility to engage



with policy issues and might increase their visibility among European citizens (see also Hrbek 2012: 376-80).

Nonetheless, mapping the initiatives for which the collection of signatures is either currently open or has been closed in the Commission's 'official registry',^{IX} it is worth noticing that in a few cases only Europarties are among the sponsors, giving funds to support the initiative. Ironically, in the initiative for the 'suspension of the EU Climate and Energy Package' (for which not enough support had been gathered) the sponsor is the Eurosceptic Europe Freedom and Democracy (EFD), asking for a suspension of allegedly 'ineffective' EU legislation. Although funding is not the only way through which the Europarties could support an initiative (they and their members could advertise and endorse it, they could offer logistic support...), their unwillingness to financially support the existing initiatives is rather surprising. While the reasons for this lack of engagement need to be better investigated, civil society organizations and citizens have started to use this new instrument largely without the active involvement of the Europarties.

6. The 2014 EP Elections and Beyond

Arguably, the most important institutional change for Europarty development which could be implemented without further reforming the Treaties was by explicitly linking the EP elections with the choice of the Commission President (i.e. Hix 2008b; Bardi *et al.* 2010: 100-01). In May 2014, European citizens were not only asked to cast their vote to elect MEPs, but also to indirectly endorse a candidate to the Presidency of the European Commission. The Lisbon Treaty introduced the norm that the European Council should “take into account” the results of the EP elections in the nomination of the Commission President.

Europarties were keen to exploit this new opportunity and five of them (pre)-selected their own candidate(s) ahead of the 2014 EP elections. The EPP selected the former President of the Euro-Group Jean-Claude Juncker; Martin Schulz, the President of the EP, became the candidate-President of the PES; Guy Verhofstadt – the leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) in the EP – became the candidate of the corresponding extra-parliamentary party; Alexis Tsipras, the leader of the Greek party SYRIZA, was selected by the European Left and José Bove and Ska Keller were the



frontrunners for the EGP, which contested the elections with a tandem of candidate-Presidents.

The importance of this development cannot be overrated: if national parties remain the key actors in the EU member states, selecting their candidates and waging their own electoral campaign in the 28 member countries of the Union, the role of the Europarties in the process of nominating a new President of the European Commission added a truly European element to the ‘second-order’ electoral contests. Most fundamentally, for the first time the Europarties became an actor in the electoral arena (Bressanelli 2014). They pre-selected the candidates that the European voters could then choose, albeit indirectly via the national parties, to lead the EU executive. The visibility of the Europarties and their candidates was not the same in each and every EU-member country (Hobolt 2014), but has certainly grown in comparison with the previous election rounds, where their role was limited to the preparation of a common manifesto (hardly read by voters).

The process inaugurated in 2014 to select the head of the European Commission came after two decades in which the role of the EP had been progressively strengthened. Before the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the nomination of a new Commission was fully controlled by the member states. With the Treaty of Maastricht, the EP was recognized the right to be consulted on the nomination of the Commission President, while the Amsterdam Treaty ruled that its “nomination shall be approved by the European Parliament”. Another important provision agreed at Maastricht extended the mandate of the European Commission to 5 years, to have it run in parallel with the EP term in office. Today, the European Council has to “take into account” the result of the EP elections (art. 17.7) and, consequently, the nominees proposed by the Europarties. In other words, while the selection of a new Commission was a purely intergovernmental affair that took place behind closed doors until the early 1990s, from Maastricht onwards the formation of a new Commission (and, in particular, the selection of its President) has been increasingly ‘parliamentarized’.

While these reforms effectively empowered the EP, the selection of the EU executive was still disconnected from the EU citizens (see Hix 1997). Yet, with the 2009 EP elections there were the first signs of ‘party politicisation’ of the process leading to the choice of the Commission President (Gagatek 2009). The EPP clearly endorsed the candidacy of the incumbent José Manuel Barroso for President. Following the EPP’s decision, the PES also



discussed the nomination of a candidate but, due to its internal divisions, its attempt was unsuccessful.

The ‘constitutional’ framework established by the Treaty of Lisbon represented a window of opportunity for the Europarties and their associated political groups in the EP. The case for an active involvement of the Europarties, and a clearer specification of the role that they could play, were presented in a number of official documents drafted by the EU institutions. In September 2012, in his ‘State of the Union’ address, the then President of the Commission Barroso declared: “an important means to deepen the pan-European political debate would be the presentation by European political parties of their candidate for the post of Commission President at the European Parliament elections already in 2014 [...] This would be a decisive step to make the possibility of a European choice offered by these elections even clearer”.

The European Commission further argued that the election of its President would benefit the EU political system by: (i) bringing more transparency to the process of selecting the “figurehead of the EU executive”; (ii) clarifying what is at stake in EP elections; (iii) enhancing the participation of the EU citizens; (iv) increasing the democratic legitimacy of the process and (v) contributing to “forging a European public sphere”.^x Its endorsement was echoed in two documents of the EP: a resolution on the elections to the EP in 2014^{xi} and an own-initiative report,^{xii} urging the national member parties to add the names or symbols of the Europarties on the ballot paper and inform citizens on the candidate-President that they supported and his (her) manifesto.

With the support of the European Commission and the EP, the Europarties had the ground prepared to play a more active role in the 2014 EP elections. While there could be drawbacks in politicizing the nomination of a new Commission and moving towards a ‘fusion’ between the executive and the legislative powers in the Union, when in June 2014 the European Council endorsed the candidacy of Juncker as the EPP candidate it became clear to everyone (even to the recalcitrant British and Hungarian Prime Ministers) that the selection of the top executive official in the EU was no longer a mere intergovernmental matter, and the Europarties were now a key actor in the process. Nonetheless, it remains to be empirically assessed whether the European citizens noticed this change, or were rather absorbed by the dynamics of the second-order, national elections.



7. Conclusions

The Europarties' role in the EU political system could be differently assessed, depending on the arena of partisan activity. While the political groups are the key actors in the parliamentary arena, in the extra-parliamentary arena (be it the electoral one, or the governmental one) the Europarties have traditionally been much less important, if not utterly irrelevant. This article has shown that there are historical reasons explaining this difference, and the development of the Europarties still reflects this historical unbalance. Yet, due to the Europeanization of policy-making, and the 'crisis' of the national parties, there are currently stronger environmental incentives to the consolidation of the extra-parliamentary 'face' of the Europarties. Indeed, this article has shown that the Europarties could play an important role in inter-institutional policy-making, and are already adapting their organizations to the purpose. Perhaps most importantly, in the 2014 EP election the Europarties have (pre-) selected their own candidates to the Presidency of the European Commission and, building on the Treaty of Lisbon, have constrained the European Council in the nomination of Jean-Claude Juncker.

Currently, the most pressing issue which the Europarties would need to address, if they aim to play a representative role in the political system of the EU, regards their low visibility among the European citizens. It may well be that the aggregation of the national results of the EP elections produces a representative *outcome* (Mair and Thomassen 2010), but to build a representative *process* what we need are political parties performing a linkage function. In this respect, the Europarties should find concrete ways to connect more with the European citizens. Individual membership and the sponsorship of European Citizens' Initiatives could be two instruments to be more visible in-between the EP elections. The creation of a transnational constituency would be a more landslide change, but its implementation has very high costs and is, at present, very unlikely. Under the current institutional set-up, however, the Europarties already have the possibility to enhance their presence in civil society. Yet, whether they are really interested or capable to do so remains a key empirical puzzle.

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¹ For the complete figures, see http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/grants/Grant_amounts_parties_11_2014.pdf

¹¹ Regulation 2004/2003(COD) was then amended with Regulation 1524/2007(COD).



- ^{III} This section and the following ones are adapted from Bressanelli (2014), 'Conclusions', pp. 168-173.
- ^{IV} Regulation 2012/0237(COD), 'European political parties and political foundations: statute and funding' repealing Regulation 2004/2003. The regulation was published in the Official Journal on 04.11.2014.
- ^V Application of Regulation 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, 2010/2201(INI), 06.04.2011.
- ^{VI} As in the 'explanatory statement' accompanying the report tabled in the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the EP and voted on 18 March 2011.
- ^{VII} Report on a proposal for a modification of the Act concerning the election of the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage of 20 September 1976, 2009/2134(INI), 28 April 2011.
- ^{VIII} Regulation no. 211/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 February 2011 on the Citizens' Initiative, art. 5.
- ^{IX} <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome> last date accessed 07 January 2014.
- ^X COM(2013) 126 final.
- ^{XI} EP resolution of 22 November 2012 on the elections to the EP in 2014 (2012/2829(RSP)).
- ^{XII} Own-initiative report on improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the EP elections in 2014 (2013/2012(INI)).

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