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## **Europarties – A Research Note**

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*Karl Magnus Johansson*

## **Europarties – A Research Note**

This paper outlines and elaborates the role of Europarties in the political system of the European Union (EU), addressing their key features and the extent to which they carry agency. By “Europarties” I mean the extra-parliamentary organisations in the EU outside the European Parliament (EP), rather than the political groups therein. It bears noting, however, that the Europarties emerged from the EP groups. Among the Europarties, the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) and the centre-left Party of European Socialists (PES) are the most important ones. Key players in and across these two Europarties have contributed to the fundamental change in the EU political and institutional environment, in which the Europarties themselves exist.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in Europarties, as they have become increasingly institutionalised and sought to raise their profile within the institutional framework of the EU<sup>1</sup>. But despite their organisational development and role in EU politics, Europarties remain under-researched and underestimated. Whilst there seems to be an enduring

1 Kūlahci, E., “Europarties: Agenda-Setter or Agenda-Follower? Social democracy and the disincentives for tax harmonization”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48 (5), 2010: 1283–1306; Van Hecke, S., “Do Transnational Party Federations Matter? (... and Why Should We Care?)”, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 6 (3), 2010: 395–411 and “Polity-Building in the Constitutional Convention: Transnational Party Groups in European Union Institutional Reform”, 50 (5), 2012: 837–852; Poguntke, T./Morlok, M./Merten, H. (eds.), *Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Parteiendemokratie*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013; Stetter, E./Duffek, K./Skrzypek, A. (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union – Europarties on the Rise*, Brussels: FEPS, 2013; *Acta Politica*, Special Issue: Europarties between ‘deepening’ and ‘widening’, 49 (1), 2014.

resilience to the idea that Europarties matter, it is all the more relevant to look now at Europarties as they have attempted to establish themselves. In this connection, a key question is how Europarties actually operate and coordinate policy among the national member parties. And how they seek to exert influence in the EU – and what impact they could have<sup>2</sup>. Against this background, it is a good time now to look at the Europarties. They have developed a form of party organisation with a supranational party structure. There is a gradual institutionalisation of Europarties and party families. Still, there is an important gap in our understanding and knowledge concerning Europarties. To some extent, Europarties are actors in their own right and not merely entities or arenas to be acted upon or through by national member parties (in government or in opposition). Yet, they have seldom been treated as independent actors carrying “agency”, that is, having capacity to act on their own.

What role do Europarties play in the EU? How can we explain them? Why and to what extent do they co-operate? What are the motivations driving their choice to co-operate? These are the questions of this paper, which seeks to clarify the role of Europarties with an account of general patterns of interaction and opportunities, explaining why national political parties have chosen to act together and organise collectively on a transnational scale. As a research note the paper thereby aims at highlighting Europarties and their role, illuminating important general issues and seeking to contribute to future research.

The questions are also applicable to the role of Europarties in processes of EU treaty reform, which have resulted in wide-ranging constitutional and institutional changes since the mid-1980s and in a vast literature. This literature largely overlooks the role of Europarties, only rarely addressing their role or the party political dimension more broadly in successive treaty

2 Raunio, T., “Political Parties in the European Union”, in: Jørgensen, K.E./Pollack, M.A./Rosamond, B. (eds.), *Handbook of European Union Politics*, London: SAGE, 2006: 247–262.; Lord, C., “The aggregating function of political parties in EU decision-making”, *Living Reviews in European Governance*, 5 (3), 2010.

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reforms or negotiations<sup>3</sup>. Europarties have contributed to EU treaty reform. They are a driving force behind European integration.

Whereas political parties often are seen as being on the decline at the national level, they take on partly new roles when combining into transnational associations and emerging as actors in a policy-making context beyond the nation state. We are dealing here with boundary actors and key activists who handle inputs into the policy process by operating through transnational transmission systems at the interface between the national and the European.

Why are political parties formed in the first place? Beyond ideology, the short, and rationalist, answer is that they are formed to increase prospects for winning desired outcomes. Accordingly, they have good reason to seek to get their acts together in order to increase their leverage. Drawing on general theories of party behaviour, political parties can be treated as adaptive and purposive. As strategic actors they can be expected to seek to fulfil certain goals – cohesion in the internal arena, influence in the parliamentary arena and votes in the electoral arena<sup>4</sup>. Political parties can be conceived of as office-seeking, policy-seeking, or vote-seeking<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, if anything, parties are information-seeking. Information is a vital power resource. Ultimately, political parties are power-seeking.

3 For rare contributions, see Budden, P., *The Making of the Single European Act: the United Kingdom and the European Community: 1979–1986*, unpublished thesis presented to Faculty of Modern History at the University of Oxford, 1994; Budden, P., “Observations on the Single European Act and ‘relaunch of Europe’: a less ‘intergovernmental’ reading of the 1985 Intergovernmental Conference”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 9 (1), 2002: 76–97; Johansson, K.M., “Tracing the Employment Title in the Amsterdam Treaty: Uncovering Transnational Coalitions”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 6 (1), 1999: 85–101; Johansson, K.M., “Another Road to Maastricht: The Christian Democrat Coalition and the Quest for European Union”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40 (5), 2002 (a): 871–893; Johansson, K.M., “Party Elites in Multilevel Europe: The Christian Democrats and the Single European Act”, *Party Politics*, 8 (4), 2002 (b): 423–439; Lightfoot, S., *Europeanizing Social Democracy? The rise of the Party of European Socialists*, London: Routledge, 2005; Van Hecke, S. (2012), op. cit.

4 Sjöblom, G., *Party Strategies in a Multiparty System*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1968.

5 Müller, W.C./Strøm, K., (eds.), *Policy, Office, or Votes? How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Political parties can be assumed to be policy-seekers seeking to influence policy outcomes. Like parties at the national and subnational levels, Europarties, in the EU context, seek to have a direct input into the policy debate and agenda by playing a policy-influencing role and thus be policy-seeking<sup>6</sup>.

In a nutshell, parties are instruments for collective action and policymaking, interest aggregation, and conflict resolution. Political parties are formed as institutional solutions to handle an internal collective action problem within or outside the legislature – to reduce the transactions costs of collective decision-making and coalition building<sup>7</sup>. Building a coalition requires effort and time and therefore involves transaction costs. Coalitions are a central feature of both domestic and international politics and serve to pool power and enhance the chances of influence over outcomes for individual actors and help to simplify the process of bargaining for the collective of actors<sup>8</sup>. Given this basic demand for co-operation the same logic applies to both national and transnational parties, which also are formed and maintained in order to influence policy and reduce transaction costs. As Lindberg *et al.*<sup>9</sup> note the formation of transnational parties is

[...] in the interest of legislators because political parties reduce the transactions costs of legislative decision-making and increase their influence over policy outcomes [...]. Since their legislative influence can only be maintained if transnational parties vote cohesively, legislators have a rationale for establishing a centralized party leadership which monitors the compliance of party members and sanctions them accordingly.

6 e.g., Johansson, K.M./Zervakis, P.A. (eds.), *European Political Parties between Cooperation and Integration*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002.; Kùlahci, E., “Theorizing party interaction within European party federations and their effects on the EU policy-making process”, *European Integration online Papers*, 6 (16), 2002; Lightfoot (2005), op. cit.; Van Hecke (2010), op. cit.; *Acta Politica*, op. cit.

7 Aldrich, J.H., *Why Parties? A Second Look*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

8 Tallberg, J./Johansson, K.M., “Party Politics in the European Council”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15 (8), 2008: 1224.

9 Lindberg, B./Rasmussen, A./Warntjen, A., “Party politics as usual? The role of political parties in EU legislative decision-making”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15 (8), 2008: 1113.

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National parties and their leaderships may use Europarty networks instrumentally for lowering transaction costs when acting and interacting in the EU. Europarties serve as a tool for reducing transaction costs for member parties for whom on-going co-ordination with so many other parties would be nearly impossible on a unilateral basis. The PES network “has been indispensable for lowering transaction costs for individual parties”<sup>10</sup>. Likewise, the EPP provides a kind of network and co-ordination function. As Hanley<sup>11</sup> notes: “Co-ordination is a more useful concept for understanding the EPP than supra-nationalism.” The then EPP secretary-general Welle also underlined this function of co-ordination:

Our key role is coordination and the bringing together of the main players such as the Commission, national governments, national leaderships and party presidents. That coordination and the construction of a joint political identity are important. The function of a European political party is to bind forces together so they can be a major player in the European Parliament [...] <sup>12</sup>

In an author interview, Welle said that in order not to be “lonely” in the European Council “you need coalition-building in advance” and to “play in a team” – even the German chancellor – and that this is “the major justification of the EPP”; as a “meeting place” and that “co-ordination is necessary in advance” of European Council meetings. To this end, Europarties such as the EPP and PES organise *party summits* of government and party leaders before European Council summits, but also hold conclaves independent of the European Council<sup>13</sup>. Europarty summits have been increasingly institutionalised and serve different functions: elite

10 Ladrech, R., *Social Democracy and the Challenge of European Union*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000: 127.

11 Hanley, D., “The European People’s Party: towards a new party form?”, in Hanley, D. (ed.), *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, London: Pinter Publishers, 1994: 195; see also Hanley, D., *Beyond the Nation State: Parties in the Era of European Integration*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

12 Quoted in *European Voice*, 11–17 July 1996.

13 The EPP has organised summits regularly since 1983, first as the EPP Conference of Party Leaders and Heads of Government, then, from late 1995, as the EPP Summit, see Jansen, T., *The European People’s Party: Origins and Development*, Brussels: European People’s Party, 2006: ch. 9.

networking, intra-party decision-making, soft policy co-ordination, bilateral contacts, and media performance<sup>14</sup>.

The main purpose of such institutionalised networking is to discuss items on the agenda, develop strategies, and – whenever possible – hammer out a common line. In addition to the leaders of the Europarty and of member parties, whether in government or in opposition, prime ministers or other ministers representing the member parties, the participants at these pre-summit meetings include people from the corresponding group in the EP and from the Commission. The influence and effectiveness of the Europarties depend on their capacity to mobilise “their” heads of government for the party cause. The party summits are a central aspect of this mobilisation process. However, their significance appears to vary over time and across party families. There are instances when party political mobilisation through Europarties and their summit meetings has been decisive for decision-making in the European Council<sup>15</sup>. Yet, there is also evidence that a lack of commitment to these meetings among individual heads of government has reduced their significance, which “depends strongly on incumbency” and this is why PES meetings did not function particularly well in the late 1990s and the early 2000s<sup>16</sup>. Specifically, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder showed little inclination to attend. They apparently saw the PES pre-summit meetings as a waste of time. Their instinct was to see exclusively other “chief executives”. The EPP has confronted fewer problems in securing the participation of its heads of government at pre-summit meetings. A reason for this is the commitment

14 Van Hecke, S./Johansson, K.M., “Gipfelpolitik politischer Parteien auf europäischer Ebene: eine vergleichende Analyse”, in: Poguntke, T./Morlok, M./Merten, H. (eds.), *Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Parteiendemokratie*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013: 175–190; Van Hecke, S./Johansson, K.M., “Summitry of Political Parties at European Level: The Case of the PES Leaders’ Conference”, in: E. Stetter./Duffek, K./Skrzypek, A. (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union – Europarties on the Rise*, Brussels: FEPS, 2013: 62–76.

15 Hix, S./Lord, C., *Political Parties in the European Union*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997; Johansson (1999, 2002a, 2002b), op. cit.

16 Poguntke, T., “Europeanization in a consensual environment? German political parties and the European Union”, in: Poguntke, T. et al. (eds.), *The Europeanization of National Political Parties: Power and organizational adaptation*, London: Routledge, 2007: 108–133.



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on the part of the German CDU and its leaders. Two German Christian Democrat chancellors, Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel, have used Europarty structures for the purpose of building up a European network<sup>17</sup>. But while the EPP has been able to secure the participation of its heads of government at pre-summit meetings, participation is not all, as limits in the ambition and capacity to co-ordinate positions may reduce the influence of the Europarties as well. Nor was, and is, the EPP really able to impose its views and any decisions on the outcome of a specific European Council summit. As John Bruton, former prime minister of Ireland, testifies:

These discussions [at EPP summits] were useful in preparing for the subsequent heads of Government meetings between all of the members. The meetings gave a particularly good insight into the thinking of Chancellor Kohl, who tended to lead the discussions within the EPP. The EPP meetings did not, however, take any decisions or give any directions as to “EPP policy” at the subsequent formal heads of Government meeting. The only occasion that I recollect anything remotely of that character happening was when we discussed a particular appointment to a job.<sup>18</sup>

Only rarely were resolutions and minutes taken at party summits made public. Especially in the light of European Council meetings “it was not in the interests of government leaders to be tied down; they needed to retain as free a hand as possible in their discussions with other government leaders”<sup>19</sup>. Europarties are unable to tie the hands of national government leaders in the negotiations. At this level the Europarties have no formal powers to take binding decisions. The most high-profile forum of the Europarties – the party leaders meetings – only goes as far as issuing resolutions and recommendations and decisions are not binding in the sense that sanctions can be levied against any member party that fails to implement them<sup>20</sup>. Arguably, Europarties are essentially transnational co-ordinating mechanisms for like-minded parties that wish to “upload” policy ideas and transmit them to other parties rather than being a locus of

17 Ibid, 125.

18 Personal letter to the author, dated 14 August 1997.

19 Jansen, *op. cit.*, 109.

20 Carter, E./Ladrech, R., “Government change, organizational continuity: The limited Europeanization of British political parties”, in: Poguntke et al., *op. cit.*, 57–85.

important decision-making<sup>21</sup>. A case in point is the way in which the Swedish social democrats used their contacts in the PES to push a domestic policy priority, the fight against unemployment, which was subsequently included in the Amsterdam Treaty in the form of special title for employment<sup>22</sup>. This could occur thanks to the partisan swing in favour of the PES. Numerically dominating the European Council in the second part of the 1990s, the socialists championed the establishment of the employment title in the new treaty. This is generally considered an example of successful transnational party politics, of a truly transnational policy contribution<sup>23</sup>.

In this vein, Europarties can be expected to matter (more) when they are in numerical ascendance. One clear conclusion from previous research is that the Europarties are able to influence decisions in the European Council when political leaders from one distinct party family outnumber those from other party families<sup>24</sup>. With special reference to the EPP, Van Hecke<sup>25</sup> emphasises that the impact and effectiveness of the strategy of the meetings of Christian Democratic Party elites on agenda setting, timetable and content of treaties is “dependent on the quality and quantity of the Christian Democratic presence in the European Council.” EPP profited from its relative majority in the European Council up to the 1990s, when Christian Democrat party elites “to a large extent shaped the politics and policies”<sup>26</sup>.

Numerical strength or superiority of a Europarty and party family alone is not a sufficient condition for influencing political outcomes in the European Council along party political lines. In addition, the heads of government of a particular Europarty must be mobilised for the joint cause. An increased volume of Europarty summitry “may be a necessary condition for influencing EU decision-making, but it is not sufficient by

21 Ibid., 80.

22 Johansson (1999), op. cit.

23 Johansson (1999), Ladrech (2000), Kūlahci (2002, 2010), Lightfoot (2005), op. cit.

24 e.g., Johansson (1999, 2002a, 2002b), op. cit.

25 Van Hecke, S., “Christian Democratic Parties and Europeanisation”, in: Van Hecke, S./Gerard, E. (eds.), *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe since the End of the Cold War*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004: 49–50.

26 Ibid., 50.

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itself”<sup>27</sup>. As Hix<sup>28</sup> notes with regard to party influence generally in the EU, “[...] translation from party strengths to policy outputs requires party actors in the same party family to cooperate, and winning coalitions to be constructed between different party families.”

So, arguably, Europarties are more likely to influence the process and outcome of negotiations in the European Council the greater the dominance of one particular Europarty, that is, the relative strength of the party families, as well as the greater their cohesion and capacity for mobilisation<sup>29</sup>. Exploring party politics in the European Council theoretically and empirically, Tallberg and Johansson<sup>30</sup> note that the theoretical hypotheses advanced “may be refined to incorporate other factors, such as the domestic political context of heads of government (majority/minority government, coalition/one party government).”

The cohesion, mobilisation and influence of Europarties are conditioned on factors pertaining to domestic politics. As Hanley<sup>31</sup> reminds us, with special reference to the EPP, even though the group of national leaders – party and governmental – happen to agree about very fundamental aspects of policy and consult regularly, “these leaders remain first and foremost national politicians, responsible to national electorates.” Arguably, this concern with domestic politics and constituencies is the central factor restraining Europarty influence. Essentially nation-bound institutions, rooted in national societies and social cleavages and issue dimensions, political parties are likely to give priority to concerns at the domestic arenas of party politics rather than at the European ones. It is difficult to create a unitary command and control structure within Europarties as they are federative “parties of parties”, consisting of *national* member parties. Accordingly, it is essential to take domestic politics into account when exploring not only how governments but also parties act in the EU. Notably, domestic institutions for (treaty) ratification must be accounted

27 Hix/Lord, op. cit., 186.

28 Hix, S., *The Political System of the European Union*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005: 187.

29 Tallberg/Johansson, op. cit., 1222–1242.

30 Ibid., 1238.

31 Hanley, 1994, op. cit., 197; see also Hanley, 2008.

for. However powerful heads of government may be in their role, they have not full control over the domestic context in which they operate. This also alerts us to the interplay between government and opposition, the inherent conflict between them, and the party-political battles that break out as a consequence, as well as to intra-government divisions.

In sum, the conditions for influence of Europarties are demanding. They must exhibit a certain degree of cohesion on the internal arena. The sheer numbers, the numerical strength, of Europarty presence in EU institutions is not a sufficient condition; there must also be effective mobilisation. There are domestic constraints on national parties and leaders that constitute important limits to Europarty influence.

In any event, the institution of the party summits is clearly one of the most significant characteristic feature and role of Europarties. These summit meetings have taken on an unprecedented importance and become the networking forum for European political leaders, with as much to be gained and discussed behind the scenes as on the formal agenda. Europarty summits have a role in oiling the wheels of the negotiations by giving a preferred line of action and by bringing together the main political players and cultivating personal relationships and trust. As Garret FitzGerald, another former prime minister of Ireland, noted in an author interview personal relationships could “mitigate” relationships between governments, where for him the Christian Democrat grouping offered an “extra chance” to shape policies in a way “helpful to you”.

National parties and their leaders, even prime ministers, may use the Europarties to promote their own agenda. In general, national political parties and elites use Europarties as a clearing-house for developing joint policies, and a means for *reducing transaction costs* when acting in the EU. Through institutionalised summitry Europarties could contribute to and affect policy agendas and outcomes in EU decision-making.

Europarties thus play a role in inter-institutional decision-making in the EU. The major Europarties are linked to EU institutions, notably the EP and the corresponding groups therein. Europarties also provide a forum for discussing appointments to important jobs in EU institutions, such as the

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Commission and the EP. Furthermore, they work out political programmes or action programmes for their corresponding party group, and common manifestos for European elections. They adopt common policies in a number of areas, often through regular or ad hoc working groups, which cover major policy areas. Continuously, there is exchange of views and information, information sharing. Moreover, there appears to be a pressure on the people delegated to working groups, for example, to reach a consensus. Alongside the formal decisions, therefore, particular deliberations and agreements may well have a kind of norm-shaping impact on member parties, and thus an influence over politics at the national level. Key activists in Europarties play an important role as norm or policy entrepreneurs<sup>32</sup>. In order to fulfil their function an organisation like the EPP has the task of *bringing a European perspective* to the issues and thereby make people see the policy options from new angles as well as of bringing together a network of political decision-makers. They are engaged in actor socialisation, at elite level, and this may lead to change in attitudes and preferences and to a reorientation of previous positions. Gatherings within transnational EU party families may socialise party officials and politicians in a manner that affects subsequent political choices<sup>33</sup>. An intriguing question is to what extent such socialising facilitates political action and decision-making.

In sum, Europarties serve a number of purposes and functions. Europarties serve as transnational co-ordinating mechanisms for like-minded parties. Clearly, they fulfil a co-ordinating function: they promote the sharing and exchange of information, knowledge and experience; and they play an important role in facilitating and institutionalising networks<sup>34</sup>. They are actors within the political system of the EU<sup>35</sup>. They have a hand in the decision- or policy-making process, and they are a driving force behind European integration. Decision-making and networking provide political

32 e.g., Johansson (1999), op. cit.

33 Ladrech (2000), op. cit.

34 e.g., Ladrech (2000) op. cit.; Ladrech, R., “The European Union and political parties”, in: Katz, R.S./Crotty, W. (eds.), *Handbook of Party Politics*, London: SAGE, 2006: 492–498.

35 Hix (2005), op. cit.

functions in their own right. There is a need for such party networks in EU politics. Most political parties within and throughout the EU are now linked into transnational networks that provide opportunities for access and influence<sup>36</sup>. So national parties form transnational alliances and Europarties in particular to *maximise their influence* in the Union. Transnationally and supranationally engaged, Europarties seek to maximise their influence by attempting to shape decision-making and policy outcomes within the EU polity. To this end, there are Europarty attempts at mobilisation and influence.

The Europarties have clearly been assigned a more important role in the EU's political system. Constitutional and legal rules recognise the role of Europarties in the Union. Since 2004 the Europarties are allocated funds from the EU's budget, as a result of the new rules regarding funding for such parties<sup>37</sup>. It seems that the main motivation for political forces to found Europarties since 2004 has been the new financial resources that become available thereby. Arguably, Europarties would become more institutionalised as a result of this funding. As Bartolini wrote in reference to the 2003/2004 regulation<sup>38</sup>:

As a result of the need to formalize the conditions of financing and of operational survival, the organization of political parties may experience a further institutionalization moving from the current network form to a more hierarchical and authoritative organization at the EU level. Europarties may become more organized because this is the only way to legally obtain the money they need to survive.

36 e.g., Johansson, K.M., *Transnational Party Alliances: Analysing the Hard-Won Alliance between Conservatives and Christian Democrats in the European Parliament*, Lund: Lund University Press, 1997.

37 See, e.g., Johansson, K.M./Raunio, T., "Regulating Europarties: Cross-Party Coalitions Capitalizing on Incomplete Contracts", *Party Politics*, 11 (5), 2005: 515–534.; Johansson, K.M., "The Emergence of Political Parties at European Level: Integration Unaccomplished", in: Gustavsson, S./Oxelheim, L./Pehrson, L. (eds.), *How Unified Is the European Union? European Integration Between Visions and Popular Legitimacy*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2009: 157–178; Poguntke et al., op. cit.; *Acta Politica*, op. cit.

38 Bartolini, S., *Restructuring Europe: Centre formation, system building, and political structuring between the nation state and the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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With the revised regulation in place, the life of the Europarties entered a new stage. For example, it allows them to campaign in European elections. Arguably, Europarties have become more autonomous vis-à-vis their member parties and vis-à-vis their respective groups in the EP. The additional funding they have obtained serves to reduce their dependence on the member parties. In the past, the development of Europarties has been hampered by their dependence on their national members for resources. It has happened that an individual party has threatened to withdraw its membership subscription. The new circumstances in which the Europarties find themselves could promote a more independent position. But it remains an open question as to whether, and to what extent, the Europarties will assume a more significant role and develop into more hierarchical organisations. Politicisation in the EU along left/right lines and around high-salience issues and institutions will encourage national parties to co-ordinate their policies further. The result will be greater policy co-ordination across the EU institutions and a more central role for Europarties.

Since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, the EP has been empowered further. The co-decision procedure is the standard mode for the making of EU laws. There is a clearer link between EP elections and the composition of the Commission, which will inevitably become more partisan in character. Tendencies toward parliamentarism strengthen the partisan dimension of EU politics. These changes, together with the constitutional regulation of Europarties, will most likely lead to closer policy co-ordination between Europarties and their respective parliamentary groups. But that remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the prominence of the European Council has generated functional pressure for co-ordination in advance of its regular summits. As the supreme political body of the EU composed of the heads of government of the member states and the president of the Commission, the European Council constitutes the site for bargaining over policy, institutional reform, etc. All major decisions in the EU nowadays go through the European Council in some shape or form. At this the highest political level, it has proved useful for heads of government to get together before European Council summits, and the party networks can then be used

through different ways of developing consensus and seeking solutions to the main political issues raised, thereby making it possible for the negotiations to advance toward conclusion.

National parties – whether in government or opposition – recognise the functional necessity to organise collectively in the EU, for purposes of allowing them and their politicians to exert influence there. The growth in EU powers – to which elites in Europarty circles thus have contributed – has presented parties with functional pressures for the transnational engagement. More broadly, transnational parties can be seen as alliances of national parties encouraged to join forces to gain political strength through collective action and intensive transnational collaboration, through interaction between key decision-makers in the EU.

It will behove future researchers on Europarties to examine the extent to which, and the conditions under which, Europarties are able to influence the EU policy process. Moreover, they should examine the possible role of Europarties in democratising the EU, in linking citizens to the Union, and in strengthening the means by which political and bureaucratic elites can be held accountable for their decisions. Champions of the role of Europarties, including key activists in Europarty circles, tend to emphasise the contribution Europarties can make to the democratisation of the EU<sup>39</sup>. Strengthened Europarties, operating under the provisions of a European party statute, have also been thought helpful for enhancing the Union's popular legitimacy. This reflects the belief that they would help citizens become politically active. The European political foundations, which are linked to the Europarties, are designed to get people talking about issues that affect citizens across Europe. Arguably, party politicisation in the EU could mobilise citizens and enhance its democratic legitimacy. It is in this context and bigger picture that Europarties have a role to play. They could contribute to strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the Union through increased politicisation on the basis of alternative ideological preferences and more open political competition, especially along left/right lines. Political parties are essential if such politicisation is to come about. A party

39 e.g., Hix, S., *What's Wrong with the European Union and How to Fix It*, Cambridge: Polity, 2008.



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system is something of a cornerstone in a European political community, imagined or real. It is critical for conflict management, for political debate on specific issues, and for the development of a European public space and problem-solving capacity. Effective Europarties could enhance the Union's capacity for action, thus strengthening the Union's legitimacy among its citizens.

The contest in the 2014 EP elections between candidates from different Europarties to become President of the European Commission, based on political platforms, brought an element of increased contestation over the polity, politics and policy of the EU. A scenario of democratic majority rule at the European level as well as of “escalation of transnational conflicts” could be envisaged<sup>40</sup>. Their new role as campaign organisations may lead to an increased politicisation of the EU, and help to make them more visible at the national level. At the same time, however, Europarties are still reliant on national parties for their development; national parties, in turn, are accountable to national constituencies. And national parties want to run their own election campaigns and determine their own policies. In the constitutional and institutional order that currently exists, there are clearly disincentives for national parties to strengthen the Europarties further. Insofar as Europarties become more relevant and influential, therefore, they are likely to be placed under stricter supervision by their member parties. This could hamper their further development. In general, national parties are careful to maintain the greatest possible autonomy, and they are unwilling to subordinate themselves to their supranational counterparts. It is therefore difficult to achieve a full-fledged integration of political parties on a European scale.

In conclusion, this paper carries implications for research on the EU including constitutional and institutional aspects, the evolution of the EU and its political system more broadly, the role of Europarties as well as national parties in that system, and in democratising the EU. This paper suggests a need to take Europarties seriously. They merit greater attention. Europarties are still insufficiently understood and deserve further research.

40 Scharpf, F.W., *No Exit from the Euro-Rescuing Trap?*, MPIfG (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies) Discussion Paper, No. 4, 2014.

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