

**Conference ‘The EP in an ever changing Union: where to go from here’
Maastricht, Montesquieu Institute, 5 – 6 March 2009**

The formation of political parties in the European Union

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‘Political parties at the European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union.’ The position of political parties within the European political process was officially laid down for the first time in the Treaty of Maastricht in 1991. I won’t be expanding here on the curious normative wording of this article suggesting that these European parties were expected to contribute to the formation of a positive European awareness. My concern today is with several other parts of the Treaty article: with ‘parties at the European level’ and with the second task formally assigned to them since the Treaty of Maastricht: expressing the political will of voters in the representative democracy that the European Union seeks to be.

My contribution will focus on two questions. Firstly, can we speak of parties at the European level in the same way we speak of parties within national political systems? And secondly, how have these parties interpreted the representative role that they are expected to perform? I will first explain what I understand by Europarties and their representative function. I will then outline the organizational evolution of Europarties from their origins in the mid-1970s up to the present day, and will show how their role has evolved. After that I’ll take stock and draw some conclusions. It will come as no surprise that Europarties are sui generis parties that differ markedly in some respects from parties at the national level. We see this for instance in their limited capacity to carry out their representative task as it has been formally defined. And finally, I will address the question of what we can attribute these deficiencies to, and how improvements could be made.

Europarties and their representative function

A Eurofederation or a Europarty in effect brings together an ideological family of parties at the European level. It is not a homogenous organization, but a reticular

conglomerate of three structures: national member parties, the parliamentary group within the European Parliament and the transnational, extraparliamentary party organization, or to use the terms of political scientists Katz and Mair, the ‘party on the ground’, the ‘party in public office’ and the ‘party in central office’. The national parties are the ‘parties on the ground’ linking the Europarty to society. The Eurogroup is the party ‘in public office’, representing the Europarty in the European Parliament. The party ‘in central office’ is the transnational party organization, which – like the group – is primarily active at the European level, and which I will refer to in my presentation as Europarty. A Europarty overarches national member parties and the parliamentary group, and it points out the political direction – at least in theory.

Over the years relationships between these different structures have certainly not always been stable and harmonious, and this is not very different today. In order to indicate the degree of integration of the different components one could use the scale developed by the German political scientist Niedermayer. He distinguished basically three stages. At the first stage, national parties maintained merely ad-hoc contacts with parties in other countries. In the second stage, the co-operative stage, the cross-national relations are embedded in a permanent trans-national organisational structure. In the third stage, the transnational organisation has evolved into a supranational organisation which restricts the autonomy of the national organisations.

The parties on the ground, in public office and in central office each contribute in their own way to the Europarty’s representative function. This afternoon I will focus on the transnational party organization, in other words the Europarty. Although this has a degree of independent authority thanks to the partial transfer of sovereignty from member parties to the transnational level, it cannot develop fully because of the lack of co-operation from the same national parties – as I hope to demonstrate.

There are different ways of interpreting the representative function of political parties. Some scholars confine it to the party’s programme function – in other words, the articulation and aggregation of voter preferences. Once these views have been selected and prioritized, the party incorporates them into its election programme, which then serves as the basis for the line-up of the parliamentary group and members of the government – if there are any. In this way, the preferences of the voters are brought into the political decision making process. But we can also interpret the party’s representative role more broadly than simply structuring the substance of voter choice. It then includes activities related to its programmatic function, such as running

election campaigns and recruiting candidates to expound or implement the party's position. I opt here for the broader interpretation, and understand it to mean, in addition to channelling and combining voter preferences, also the recruitment and selection of political personnel, the mobilization of voters and the shaping of policy. In brief, it refers to the linkage function of parties, as intermediaries between state and society.

Historical development of Europarties

Political parties largely evolve in response to changes in their institutional environment. Somewhat simplified: the evolution of parliaments that controlled government brought with it the formation of groups, and extending suffrage went hand in hand with the rise of mass parties. This institutional mechanism has also functioned at the European level. Soon after the establishment of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in the early 1950s, socialist, Christian democrat and liberal groups were formed and went on to gain formal recognition.

After the Treaties of Rome it would be more than twenty years before the first direct elections were held for the European Parliament, the successor to the Common Assembly. When it became clear during the 1970s that elections were on the way, Europarties were established, most of them calling themselves federations. They were in the co-operative stage, in the terms of Niedermayer: through transnational co-operation the national parties hoped to enhance their influence at the European level. These proto-Europarties performed some of the election-related functions, such as drafting joint election programmes and co-ordinating national election campaigns. Compared with political parties at a national level, the functions of the Europarties were very limited – for example, they had no say in the recruitment of candidates. As a result, their organizational structure was weak. 'Confederation' might have been a more appropriate name than 'federation'. Although a few formally took internal decisions based on some kind of majority voting, in practice decisions were taken mostly on the basis of unanimity, because most member parties were not prepared to relinquish any of their sovereignty. This organizational weakness carried through into the unequal relationship between the Europarties and the more established Euro-groups. MEPs tended to listen more to member parties or to the Eurogroup leadership

than to the Europarties; after all, that was where they were dependent on for re-election and for their parliamentary career. The Europarties were therefore unable to guide – let alone direct – the activities of the Eurogroup, amongst other things because they were entirely dependent on them for their funding, staffing and accommodation.

In the early 1990s the Europarties entered into a new phase, once again thanks to new opportunities arising out of growing European integration. From 1987 onwards, successive treaties had strengthened the supranational character of the EC, in particular because the European Council of Ministers could increasingly take decisions based on qualified majority voting and because the powers of the European Parliament were extended. This in turn made the Europarties stronger, as demonstrated by their formal recognition in the Treaty of Maastricht. They became more self-confident, which was reflected symbolically in the fact that most began calling themselves ‘parties’ rather than ‘federations’. Those who had not done so yet also introduced the majority vote principle into their internal decision-making processes. In this way, they arrived at the supranational integration stage distinguished by Niedermayer, at least in theory. However, the practice was not truly supranational, at least outside the EPP, because not only the search for consensus tended to remain the guiding principle of the Europarties, but also because member parties usually had the formal option of withdrawing from a majority decision.

The most important adjustment to the organizational structure of the Europarties during this period was the institutionalization of conferences of national party leaders (frequently also heads of government in the case of the Christian democrats and social democrats), preceding the meetings of the European Council. These conferences were also attended by the most prominent political associates within the EU institutions. The creation of this forum of national party leaders was linked to the restriction of the power of national veto within the European political process, which had increased the room for political manoeuvre. The chances of success were boosted by co-ordinating and mutually accommodating the political opinions of the different leaders within the context of the Europarty in preparation for the European summits.

Europarties thus evolved in the late 1990s into organizations with a more pronounced political stance and more functions. They no longer focused solely on drawing up election programmes and – to a lesser degree – mobilizing voters, but also

on influencing EU decision-making. And they became increasingly involved in common policy-making. Thanks to the more co-ordinated activities of party leaders, the Europarties were able to seize somewhat more of the initiative in their relationship with the Eurogroups. However, their position always remained secondary, partly because the relationship of material dependence on the Eurogroups remained unchanged.

The next phase in the development of the Europarties began in 2003 with the introduction of the statute setting out their funding. These ‘regulations governing political parties and rules regarding their funding at European level’ had enormous consequences for the European party system. Firstly, they prohibited material support of the Europarties by the Eurogroups. Because the Europarties could also claim funding from the European Parliament, they now became more autonomous – in a financial sense at least –, although in terms of resources they still lagged much behind the Eurogroups. Besides, the funding regulation soon led to the creation of five new Europarties, alongside the five already existing ones. This increase meant greater opportunities at the European level for the expression of the political will of citizens. In 2008 the Europarties received a total of 10.6 million euro’s in funding.

The funding regulation thus created its own dynamic, not only with regard to the number of beneficiaries, but also in relation to newly funded organizations. In December 2007 ‘European political foundations’ became eligible for financial support (amounting to about 5 million euro’s). They have to promote debate about Europe and to involve citizens in this dialogue, and are expected to play their part in boosting the representative role of the Europarties. All large Europarties quickly set up a foundation, which usually took the form of a network of member party think tanks. The foundations assist the Europarties with underpinning and developing policy, which might theoretically improve their position vis-à-vis the Eurogroups.

Since the end of the 1990s the most important Europarties in any event have sought to strengthen their ties with their rank and file – the national member parties. They have also looked for ways of making the relationship with member parties less a matter for the national party elite and of raising their profile amongst individual party members. One way in which they have done so is to encourage the use of their logo on membership cards or on national party websites. Member parties in turn have also tried to increase support for the Europarties. In the PES, some of them no longer had

delegates to the PES congress appointed by the party leadership, but by their own national party conference. And among the rank and file various spontaneous initiatives were set up under the Europarty flag.

The logical culmination of these initiatives from above and from below is of course individual membership of Europarties. The EPP introduced this option in the 1990s and the ELDR followed in 2004 (although it has yet to be translated into practice). The PES does not have individual members. As for the European Green Party, those interested may register as 'supporters'. Attracting new members or supporters has not exactly been a success: the EPP has 120 members, while the Greens have some 1,300 supporters. None of them has voting rights.

Evaluation

Since the end of the 1970s the principal functions of the Europarties have been the articulation and aggregation of voter preferences in the first place, and to a lesser extent the mobilization of voters. New tasks have been added over time. In the 1990s greater emphasis was given to formulating common policy, agenda-setting and actively influencing in a co-ordinated way the outcomes of the European Council. More recently, there have been attempts to broaden public support by integrating subnational units of member parties and individual citizens within the organizational context of the Europarties.

We can say that although Europarties have acquired a broader range of representative roles, in general they have achieved only limited success in carrying out these tasks. This does not concern so much their bigger focus on processes of common policy-making. Here, Europarties have succeeded somewhat in raising their political profile and improving their ability to set agendas. We can expect the advent of affiliated political foundations to reinforce this trend. The Europarties have also proved effective at co-ordinating the views of party and government leaders to enable them to influence the decision-making processes of the European Council.

As opposed to these relative successes, the Europarties' role of mobilizing voters has left much to be desired. The average turnout in the European elections was 63% in 1979, falling continuously to less than 46% in 2004. Opinion polls show that elections have by no means narrowed the gap between the European Union and the European public. Various things can also be said about the articulation and aggrega-

tion roles. Although the large Europarties have at least drawn up election programmes for each election, these are viewed by many as exceedingly vague. What is more, the fact that many member parties also produce their own manifestos as a matter of course has damaged the status of the joint programmes.

Before we will answer the question how these ambivalent results can be explained, we will first sum up the organizational development of Europarties in the past thirty years. Here we can detect a clear trend. Europarties have progressed beyond the stage of contact and co-operation on Niedermayer's scale. Almost all have begun calling themselves 'parties' in the wake of the Treaty of Maastricht, although this doesn't mean that they have become fully-fledged and fully integrated party organizations in Niedermayer's sense, which entails among other things individual membership and internal decision-making in accordance with the principle of majority voting. While the principle has formally been introduced in most Europarties, this has usually amounted to very little in practice, except perhaps for the EPP. When real issues are at stake, seeking consensus is often still the norm, for the simple reason that member parties do not wish to abandon their influence on essential matters in favour of a supranational body that can overrule them. Member parties are also reticent about individual membership. They are afraid it will promote the supranational structure of the Europarties and undermine their pivotal national role within these organisations.

Quote 'Genuinely integrated European parties would require a further transfer of "sovereignty" from national parties', according to the Swedish political scientist Johansson, and that's just what member parties are afraid of. Member parties are willing to use the Europarties and let them carry out certain tasks at the European level when they expect to benefit from it. Examples are the establishment of Eurogroups in the European Parliament (without them the national parties would not have much influence at all) and the meetings of party leaders which exercise influence on the agenda of the European Council. The institutionalization of these meetings was regarded as a sign of revitalization of the Europarties, but in practice they are hardly more than intergovernmental meetings between national party leaders which are not accountable to any federal body.

A larger intermediary role for the Europarties in the linkage-process between citizens and political elite of the Union might be more difficult to swallow by the member parties as it would weaken their own position. The individual

membership of the Europarties, insofar as it exists at all, does not mean much as long as these members have no voting rights. Also at the European elections the Europarties play a very modest part. It is paradoxical that they were set up with an eye to direct European elections, but that national member parties have then gone on to virtually dominate the European electoral process up till now. After all, they recruit the parliamentary candidates, relatively often draw up their own election programmes and force the election campaigns into a national context. This 'nationalisation' leads to a distortion of the representative mechanism: the MEP's represent the electorate in the European political arena on the basis of nationally determined voter preferences.

This problem could be at least partly solved by granting Europarties, after thirty years, a more central procedural position within the European electoral process. This can be achieved fairly simply by having a portion of the MEP's elected by means of transnational, Union-wide candidate lists drawn up by the Europarties. This would strengthen the Europarties' positions in that they themselves would also have to draw up candidate lists – thus also strengthening their position vis-à-vis the MEPs. The Europarties themselves would conduct campaigns in all member states on European issues, which should also give more meaning to their European election programmes. Thus the election contest would acquire a stronger European character, certainly if it was also personalized by having the European Parliament nominate and appoint the chair of the European Commission after the elections. The Europarties would benefit from this, since they would have to put forward candidates for this position, which would give them also the opportunity to engage citizens or individual members in the nomination process. All in all, the link between the European electorate and the European institutions would be reinforced.

Conclusion

Clearly, the Europarties are not yet able to articulate the political will of the citizens very well, as demanded by the Treaty of Maastricht and also the Treaty of Lisbon. The question is whether they are to blame for this themselves. Obviously, the political system of the European Union is very different from a national political system. As the Italian political scientist [Luciano] Bardi put it: 'even if, for analytical purposes, we consider the EC a fully autonomous political system, then the most important institutional condition for political party development, the centrality of parliament,

does not pertain'. After all, there is no European government dependent on a majority in the European Parliament. As a consequence, the power of a Europarty is still rather limited.

The future of the Europarties depends on the possibility of fulfilling their intermediary and representative function in a more substantial way. Here they depend on the national parties, directly and indirectly. Indirectly: the national parties determine the direction of European integration through their representatives in various European institutions, which in turn determines the development of the Europarty. The institutional innovations mentioned earlier (pan-European lists, election of the chair of the European Commission) could improve the representative function of the Europarty.

At the same time, the member parties can exercise direct influence on the structure of the Europarty. 'National parties remain the "gatekeepers" on transnational party activity', in the words of the British political scientist Ladrech. Europarties depend on their goodwill – which was so far rather modest. The Europarties lack real independent authority as well as sufficient resources. Combined with the institutional peculiarities of the European political system, this explains the curious structure of the Europarty: a decentralized network-like co-ordinating organisation, which allows horizontal contacts between MEPs, European Commissioners and government leaders in the European Council as well as vertical contacts between those people and the national party elites. In other words, Europarties facilitate rather than represent – and this will last as long as the member parties want this.