



EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND FOUNDATIONS: THE 'TISSUE' THAT CONNECTS?

POLICY BRIEF | NOVEMBER 2019

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To the average European citizen, the political groups in the European Parliament, which help shape EU-wide legislation, are a vaguely familiar concept. But there is much less knowledge of the European political parties (as opposed to groups) and the think-tanks that are affiliated to them.

The dominant players have traditionally been the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), and the Federation of Liberal and Democrat parties (renamed ALDE in 2012), all of which were formed in the 1970s, as confederations of national parties from across the European Union.

They were joined by the European Green Party and the Party of the European Left in 2004, and then by the European Conservatives and Reformists Party in 2009.

Part of that eco-system are the foundations/think-tanks, which are affiliated to each of the parties, based in part on the German Stiftung model, bringing together the think-tanks at the national level. The parties then also have women and youth networks.

So what role do the European political parties and foundations play? How do they interact with the European Parliament groups and Commissioners, and how do they affect political and policy co-ordination in Brussels and across national capitals?

European Political Parties and Foundations: The 'tissue' that connects?

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By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com

THE BRIDGE FROM THE BUBBLE

The EPP is “the bridge between the ‘Brussels’ bubble and national politics,” says Luc Vandeputte, the EPP’s deputy secretary-general. “The distinction between group and party needs to be made.”

The main political parties can count on full members from all 28 member states. They are then allowed to have associate members from candidate countries and observer members from other European countries.

For example, the PES has 33 member parties within the EU, associate members in candidate countries and observer members from the likes of Israel and Turkey.

The EPP’s pre-European Council summits, which have gathered national leaders, presidents or prime ministers, since 1980, lie at the heart of its political machine. Their importance was entrenched by veteran German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who established the principle that attendance of EPP summits was mandatory, and that lead has been followed. Angela Merkel has never missed one.

Just as important, say EPP officials, are the ten sectional Council formations that co-ordinate policy and positions on EU legislation. These are an offshoot of the EPP Summit and discuss and co-ordinate the positions of EPP ministers ahead of Council of Ministers meetings.

“You will not find the same sense of belonging with other groups,” says Antonio López-Istúriz MEP, the secretary-general of the European People’s Party.

That focus on policy formation and co-ordination at the top level can also be found in the PES, who have their

own pre-Council summits and ministerial meetings by sector.

“The core business of our work is preparing the co-ordination of our ministers to change Europe’s direction through PES ministerial networks such as the EPSO, GAC and ECOFIN,” says Yonnc Polet, the deputy-secretary-general of PES. “We are a political party. We are strong because we are in power and can implement our policies to improve the lives of citizens. We need to support our prime ministers in this endeavour”, he adds.

That attitude is underscored by the PES’s approach to agreeing on common policy where, unlike in the European Parliament, the European parties typically operate more by consensus.

“In the (political) group, it is one MEP, one vote. In the PES, when we want to take a line, we work very hard to get everyone on board,” says Polet.

Yet the PES has also opened up to others outside its family – most notably, Alexis Tsipras, the former Greek Prime Minister, whose Syriza party is not part of the PES, but who is invited to PES ministerial meetings.

“We are entering a period of coalitions at the national level. At the EU level, we are opening up to other parties that are not part of the family, such as Alexis Tsipras or Demetris Christofias in the past,” explains Polet.

The ALDE, which has tended to hold premierships in a handful of member states and five ALDE affiliated Commissioners in the Juncker executive, also have their own pre-summit gatherings and thematic policy groups.

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Mar Garcia Sanz, secretary-general of the European Green Party, tells EURACTIV that the party began to coordinate among themselves in the 1970s, developing into an umbrella organisation.

It is a different story for the European Green Party (EGP), which is steadily increasing its number of ministers and member parties in national governments across the EU and, as a result, are in the process of setting up their own gatherings specifically involving green members in office to share experiences.

“As newcomers to the national government scene, we are at the beginning of this marathon,” says Garcia Sanz, who adds that “we believe that this Green wave has just started – our message is becoming mainstream”.

In addition to their ministerial groups, the big European parties are also invited to party group meetings in the Parliament.

Among smaller parties, it is a different story. For example, the 13 MEPs in the European Free Alliance (EFA) may sit alongside the Green group, but they also have their own structure and political family. The EFA party includes MEPs that are members of other groups in the European Parliament –representing the Belgian N-VA, who sit with the European Conservatives and Reformist Group and the GUE.

The agreement between the Greens and the EFA group means the two organisations have separate group meetings and organise their own study days.

When it comes to the driving of policy agendas, personality matters, says Polet, pointing to former PES president Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, whose focus on economic and financial regulation following the 2008 financial crash drove much of the financial regulation of the Barroso II Commission, and led to the formation of the Global Progressive Forum and Financewatch, the Brussels-based NGO which monitors the financial sector.

“For me, the aim is that the PES succeeds in improving living standards in Europe, like a national party does in its member state. This is why, ahead of the European elections, we produced a short, punchy manifesto for voters as well as a work programme for the new Commission,” Polet says.

THE ‘CONNECTING TISSUE’

If the political groups can claim to be the ‘tissue’ that connects national parties across Europe, the same can be said of the foundations, which bring together academia and civil society.

“A think tank is always the sum of its people,” says Tomi Huhtanen, the executive director of the EPP-affiliated Martens Centre think tank.

The model of the foundations tends to be more of a coordinating role rather than a Brussels-based rival to national think-tanks, typically providing financial support, helping their national members get speakers and assisting with publication.

“Our strength is on the ground as the connecting tissue,” says Daniel Kaddik, Executive Director of the European Liberal Forum (ELF).

In the foundations, staff tend to be a cross between academics and activists, and most of the work on publications is done by national think tanks.

“Beyond our own work we are the ‘broker’ for our member organisations and promote the work that they do,” says Kaddik.

He adds that the ELF, which has 46 member think-tanks and around 300 individual members, typically runs more than 100 programmes per year.

Around 75% of the ELF’s funding comes from the European Parliament, the rest from membership fees and donations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their political culture and ideology, Kaddik says the ELF is ‘far more decentralised’ than the EPP and Socialists. “It’s a cultural thing”, he adds.

But there are wide disparities between member states when it comes to think-tanks. There is a divide between the ‘established political culture’ across most of the EU-15 and the more ‘uneven’ state in the central and eastern European countries.

That is a product of institutional memory, funding and culture. The German foundations became a success after 30 years, primarily through the work they do abroad.

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In the EPP family, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), with its annual budget of €150 million and a staff of over 600 employees, is the strongest national player. With that in mind, the European foundations are anxious to ensure that the established think-tanks do not dominate the agenda.

The Martens Centre operates on the 'one organisation, one vote' principle, a practice which is replicated among its rival foundations. Of the eight members of the Martens Centre board, one is from the KAS.

"You cannot compare the foundations of northern countries (with large budgets) with their southern counterparts," says Mar Garcia Sanz.

But it would be a mistake to think of the foundations as conventional think-tanks. For one thing, they are overtly political. For another, they have access to top politicians that most think-tanks can only dream of.

FINANCE – A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Having long been reliant on the benevolence of the party groups, the political parties effectively became independent in July 2004, when new EU regulations permitted them to receive annual funding from the European Parliament. In 2007, they were joined by the foundations and, after successive revisions to the statute and funding of European political parties and foundations, these rules can now cover up to 90% of the expenditure of a party, while the rest should be covered by own resources, such as membership fees and donations.

From September 2008, the European Parliament took over the funding and now awards annual operating grants, and 10 European political parties and 10 European political foundations received funding from the EU budget, in 2018.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the changes have been felt less by the parties and foundations of longer standing.

"The EPP has always lived outside the structure of the Brussels bubble. Our stakeholders/clients are the national parties and the governments," says Antonio López-Istúriz.

But for others, the change was vital.

The reforms "ensured our independence and prepared the ground to develop into professional European political organisations," says Kaddik of the European Liberal Forum.

That message is echoed by Polet, deputy secretary-general of the Party of European Socialists. Prior to the 2004 reforms, party staff were hired and paid by the group, and worked out of offices in the European Parliament. Relations were "not easy", he says.

Others, however, express concern about the way that the Regulation works in practice, particularly the role of the 'Authority for Political Parties and Foundations', appointed by the European Parliament, which is responsible for supervising the regime.

One party official describes the financing regulation as "one of the most restrictive and complicated bits of European Parliament. It is very hard to find sources of income that can be accepted by the Parliament's services – we should be able to operate without legal studies over each euro".

"More and more the rules are being shaped to the detriment of the small parties," the official adds.

Daniel Kaddik, however, has a more nuanced view on the difficulties of the new financing regime.

"The application process is quite easy," he says, though he concedes that the system involves "a lot of compliance without clarity about the interpretation of the regulation".

CAMPAIGN WITHOUT CAMPAIGNING

"The key time for the European political parties is the European elections," says Yonnec Polet of the PES.

That seems obvious, and it is undeniably true that the months ahead of the pan-EU polls are the time of the most intensive work in both the political parties and the foundations. Yet the European parties run into a paradox that lies at the heart of the regulations that govern them: the political parties are legally barred from campaigning in the European elections.

"Beyond our guidelines, we sign a contract with our members that none of our joint activities can be used for campaigning," says Kaddik.

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From all players, there is frustration at the political constraints that they are working within.

“The moment that we are allowed to put the (EPP) logo on the ballot paper would galvanise knowledge of our existence,” says the EPP’s Luc Vandeputte.

The Green party’s Mar Garcia concurs: “We are a political party and our main goal is to gather votes to fulfill our political objectives. We are political animals at an inherent disadvantage compared to national parties because we can’t actually fight elections”, she says.

“We are a product of the state of play politically in the EU,” says Garcia. “We currently have 28 elections because there is no transnational list.”

The statute precludes direct campaigning in national elections and referendums. “It’s very difficult to work as a party if you can’t campaign,” says another senior party official.

THE FUTURE

The ambivalence of EU leaders towards the Spitzenkandidat process and transnational lists for the European Parliament elections has left the European political parties in an awkward position. They tend to be pro-European and understand that part of their role is in ‘strengthening the European message’, as one senior party official puts it.

Meanwhile, their inability to publicly campaign contributes to a general lack of public awareness about how the party group and political structure works at EU level.

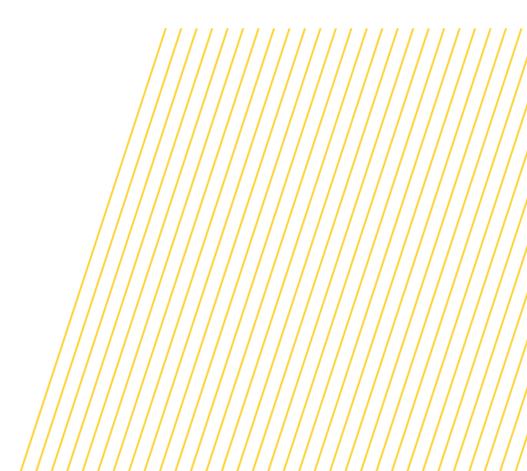
The parties will hold their first annual congresses since the European Parliament elections over the coming months.

In some countries, European parties enjoy plenty of prominence. For example, Polet says that both Martin Schulz and Frans Timmermans had great visibility during their Spitzenkandidat campaigns (in 2014 and 2019, respectively), a message which is shared by other parties. But both the political groups and the foundations have to cope with the reality that the strength of their presence across member states is uneven.

All parties EURACTIV spoke with say they are constantly trying to improve communications with their member parties.

In the 2018 revision to the political parties’ statute, MEPs in the European Parliament called for national parties to be required to display the logo and political manifesto of their affiliated European party on their websites, as a condition for accessing funds.

For the moment, the slow pace of progress towards transnational lists for the European Parliament elections, and resistance from national parties makes that a long-term goal.



Visual Guide to European Political Families

European Political Structures



EU institutional representation





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