

Bring in the Europarty activists: three alternative models for engaging with grassroots members

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Introduction

Europarties are most likely unknown organisations even among most members or activists of their national member parties. This is not surprising. In European Parliament (EP) elections the party groups of the Europarties remain firmly in the background, and Europarties and the EP groups seldom feature in national media between European elections. This low or almost non-existent grassroots-level presence stands in striking contrast to the strong role of Europarties in the institutions of the European Union (EU). Europarties co-ordinate the positions of their national member parties, particularly before European Council summits, and integrate interests across the Union and beyond. Through their heads of national governments, EP party groups and Commis-

sion portfolios, Europarties are in a powerful position to shape the laws, policies and agenda of the EU.

According to the ‘party article’ in the Treaty (Article 10, paragraph 4 of the Treaty on European Union), ‘Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.’ However, Europarties are easily perceived as being part of the ‘Brussels bubble’ that should do more to reach out to civil society and citizens (Van Hecke et al 2018). Europarties have introduced membership for individuals, but in her pioneering study Hertner (2019) showed that Europarties had only very small numbers of individual members, with national member parties often against giving individual members stronger participation rights in terms of leadership selection or policy formulation. Hertner thus argued that Europarties should empower their grassroots activists through granting them real participatory opportunities.

Interestingly, according to Hertner the Party of European Socialists (PES) has in many ways been – or at least was – a forerunner in engaging with individual members, or ‘activists’ as they are called in PES. Before the 2009 EP elections, PES launched an open consultation process that enabled the activists and other stakeholders to send in their written contributions. The activists clearly appreciated the consultation process as did many MEPs and national member parties, and it resulted in a comprehensive election manifesto. After the 2009 elections PES adopted the ‘the PES activists

initiative', whereby an initiative was tabled at the PES presidency if backed by 2.5 percent of activists from at least 15 member parties or affiliated organisations – and the activists were also successful in using the initiative. PES activists can participate informally in PES policy discussions through various online platforms and have a special 'PES Activists Forum'. At the same time PES had not granted activists any real decision-making rights or representation in PES congress or other bodies. Hertner (2019, 497) thus concluded that 'the PES has the highest number of activists and a lively community spreading across Europe, but the PES activists' scheme is only a type of "light membership", as the formal powers of the activists remain very weak.' More worryingly, she also reported that the momentum had been lost as the activists were frustrated with the strong opposition from national member parties that were not willing to give the activists a bigger role inside the Europarty.

Active engagement with grassroots activists involves two major challenges: how to accomplish it (organisation); and how to connect the activities of the individual members to Europarty decision-making (influence). This paper focuses on the former aspect but acknowledges that a basic prerequisite for successful grassroots mobilisation is that the individual members feel that their efforts are not ignored. Hence, whatever the exact participatory arrangement, Europarties should guarantee that the views of the grassroots activists are channelled into their policies – or, at the very least, are debated and voted upon in Europarty organs. Without such a pub-

lic commitment, there is no purpose in reaching out to grassroots activists.

This paper discusses the costs and benefits of investing in a 'bottom-up' approach inside Europarties. It recognises that Europarties face the problem of scale: even democratic innovations such as deliberative panels or online platforms cannot bring all citizens or party members across Europe together. While recognising such practical difficulties, the paper nonetheless argues that offering grassroots activists genuine opportunities for meaningful participation brings clear advantages for Europarties. The second part of the paper puts forward three concrete proposals for connecting with individual members. The concluding discussion summarises and reflects how the changing modes of political participation provide both challenges and possibilities for Europarties.

1. The costs and benefits of involving the activists

It is common to talk about a 'participatory turn' in politics, whereby citizens are no longer content to wait for another four or five years to vote in elections (Pate-man 1970; Barber 1984; Menser 2018). Against the backdrop of falling levels of turnout in national elections and diminishing trust in political institutions, public authorities across the world have established various types of participation mechanisms, from citizens' initiatives to 'democratic innovations', an umbrella term covering novel institutions - such as deliberative panels, mini-publics, crowdsourcing, or consultative assemblies

- that directly involve citizens in public decision-making (eg Smith 2009; Setälä and Schiller 2012; Elstub and Escobar 2019). Overall, digital means of communication, social media and various online discussion boards included, have become increasingly important. Individual politicians, political parties, private and public sector actors, and indeed the Commission of the EU have therefore invested resources into online feedback and dialogue channels. There is no scholarly consensus about the effectiveness of such instruments, but they are clearly here to stay and are popular particularly among younger age groups.

Reaching out to the grassroots level is no easy task for Europarties in an era when even national parties are suffering from diminishing memberships and vanishing local branches. Yet, also inside political parties it might be better to talk about changing patterns of participation. National parties have delegated decision-making to ordinary members, for example regarding leadership selection, with some parties even allowing non-members to vote. Parties have lowered barriers for membership, making it easier and less costly to join. Individual members in turn clearly appreciate their increased influence inside the parties. Traditionally it has been assumed that left-wing parties, and leftist persons in general, would be more supportive of inclusive decision-making structures, but parties across the board have introduced reforms empowering ordinary party members (eg Hansen and Saglie 2005; Scarrow 2015; van Haute and Gauja 2015; Scarrow et al 2017; Borz and Janda 2020). Par-

ties have also invested in their online presence and in utilising digital tools in intra-party communication and decision-making. While physical meetings are still needed at different levels of party organisation, parties have introduced a variety of online participatory mechanisms – from digital platforms to online video conferences – and the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic no doubt will lead to increased use of such online methods. The pandemic period has seen a large number of virtual EU meetings from online European Council summits to hybrid Europarty events. Technically it is therefore easy to bring people together from different corners of the EU. Hence, the question is whether Europarties consider it worth the effort.

Critical voices point out that there is no way of ensuring the representativeness of the activists taking part in the discussions. This is a problem associated more broadly with direct democracy and democratic innovations: those citizens with more at stake or a greater interest in the issue will participate, and not the ‘silent majority’. For example, inside Europarties it is conceivable that individuals with more pro-EU attitudes will come forward, as more Eurosceptical persons anticipate that their views would not be appreciated. Another possibility is unrepresentative polarisation: participants will consist primarily of persons from both ends of a policy dimension – for example, voters who are either strongly against or for European integration. However, deliberative experiments have shown that participants often change or moderate their views as the discussions fa-

facilitate better understanding of opposing arguments. National parties or other organised actors can also try to manipulate the discussion for their ends, a strategy often found in connection with referendums and citizens' initiatives. And finally, the outcome of the activists' deliberations may contradict the positions of the Europarties, and this might cause tensions inside the party organisation.

But the biggest question mark concerns the mobilisation of activists. It is very difficult to predict how many will become involved, especially if there is no existing active network of grassroots members. Here a crucial element is information – making sure that potentially interested citizens learn about the mechanism. An equally important challenge is durability: for the participatory instrument to be successful, the persons involved should remain committed to it for a longer time. The best way to achieve this is through ensuring that the views of the activists are taken seriously by the Europarties. Indeed, in the context of local or national politics a major challenge for democratic innovations has been their low impact: politicians have often praised citizens' input without taking on board their recommendations. In addition, activists should be given representation in Europarty organs, with financial rewards offered for those individual members organising the discussions.

However, the positive effects arguably outweigh such critical remarks. Engaging with the grassroots members has at least three main benefits. First, it is an investment in the future. Younger age cohorts appreci-

ate and utilise online participation mechanisms. Out of all the party families, particularly centre-left parties have been struggling to recruit new members, and hence a bottom-up approach would make the Europarties and their national member parties more appealing to younger voters. Second, active consultation of grassroots members would bring about more informed or 'Europeanised' policy-making. Currently the Europarties mainly aggregate the positions of their national member parties, and thus the European dimension does not receive sufficient attention beyond input from members of EU institutions. Through a participatory mechanism bringing together activists from across the EU, the Europarties would receive views and arguments not tied to the positions of the national parties. Here an obvious point of comparison is the way in which the Commission hears a variety of stakeholders when preparing new policies, as otherwise it would be too reliant on information provided by national governments. And third, engaging with the grassroots activists would make the Europarties – as well as their national member parties – organisationally more vibrant and dynamic and increase their presence in the member states.

Beyond such intra-party arguments, it is also from a normative point of view important that elected representatives and parties interact with the citizens between elections (Esaïsson and Narud 2013). National MPs and MEPs maintain contacts with their constituents, but in that context the dialogue takes place between the individual citizen or an interest group and the elected

office-holder. Europarties in turn fulfil a valuable coordinating function: they promote the sharing and exchange of information, knowledge and experience, and play an important role in facilitating and institutionalising networks. However, until now such networking has been almost exclusively limited to national and European political elites. Europarties should clearly do more to ‘contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union’ – to cite the ‘party article’ referred to above. But as argued in the next section, much depends also on the attitudes of national member parties towards such bottom-up mechanisms.

2. Designing mechanisms for grassroots participation

This section puts forward three alternative models for engaging with grassroots activists. These proposals should be viewed as ‘rough ideas’ that deliberately do not go into details. The models are summarised in Table 1.

The Conference on the Future of Europe model obviously draws its inspiration from the conference with the same name that was officially launched on Europe Day, 9 May, in 2021 and is scheduled to run until spring 2022. This model is based on continuous deliberations, both within individual member states and transnationally, with also regular interaction between the activists and the Europarty. The outcomes could be a variety of position papers and reports, perhaps drawing on sur-

veys of activists, that are available publicly and brought to the attention of the Europarty organs. This model is the most demanding both in terms of organisation and input from the activists, and clearly requires a committed network of grassroots members. Hence, it is important that unnecessary obstacles for participation are removed so that the process is as inclusive as possible. The same consideration applies also to the two other models.

The *party congress model* is geared towards the congresses of the Europarty, with the activists involved in shaping the agenda and decisions of the congresses through various position papers and initiatives. Again, deliberations could take place within member states and transnationally, and activists should be ensured representation in the Europarty congress. The *campaign model* would focus on the EP elections, with the activists contributing to the programme of the Europarty – and perhaps to the programmes of national member parties – whilst also carrying out more traditional campaign work such as distributing information and campaign material or organising events. In this model the crucial element is making sure that the positions and ideas of the activists are not ignored in the final versions of the programmes. Activists should thus be included in any working groups preparing the programmes.

The models can be evaluated independently but can also be seen as different dimensions of a more comprehensive strategy for reaching out to the activists. Each of them emphasises online debates, but also envisages

Table 1. Three alternative models for engaging with grassroots activists.

	The Conference on the Future of Europe model	Party congress model	Campaign model
Participants	Activists (+ politicians)	Activists (+ politicians)	Activists (+ politicians)
Organisation	Deliberations within member states and transnationally – activists also brought together periodically to Brussels to interact with the Europarty	Deliberations within member states and transnationally – activists also present in the Europarty congress	Deliberations within member states and transnationally – activists present in the drafting and adoption of the Europarty election programme
Timing	Continuous	Emphasis on Europarty congresses	Emphasis on EP elections
Outcomes	Position papers, surveys of members, reports, etc that are available publicly and discussed by Europarty organs	Position papers, initiatives, etc – shaping the agenda and decision-making of the Europarty congress	Shaping the Europarty election programme (preferably also inside national parties), and contributing to the campaigns of national member parties and the Europarty through campaign work

activists’ presence in Brussels. Whichever organisational model is adopted, it is essential that the outcomes of the deliberations are not ignored by the Europarties. The most transparent way of achieving this would be that the positions of the activists are debated and voted upon in Europarty organs where the activists would also be represented.

In terms of participants and organisation, it is a question of finding a balance between self- organi-

sation and top-down co-ordination. Europarties would have to take organisational responsibility for the deliberations. To be sure, one option is delegating the design and implementation of the deliberations exclusively to the activists themselves, but even then the Europarties would need to appoint someone as a designated person for overseeing the process – co-ordinating discussions, maintenance of digital platforms, translation help, and just as a contact point in Brussels. Ideally, the Europarties should have a staff member, or maybe a co-ordinating team, for interacting with the activists. The political foundations could also be involved in managing the processes, but it is important that the activists have a direct link to the Europarties so that they feel belonging to the same organisation. It is probable that co-ordinating the debates would not require many organisational resources, either in terms of working hours or funding. A potential solution is of course delegating public mobilisation to national member parties that would organise debates and provide venues for citizen participation (Wolkenstein 2020, 138). However, in all three models the fundamental goal is to facilitate transnational or ‘European’ discussions by bringing together activists from as many different countries as possible. Activists could also include politicians (national MPs, MEPs, Europarty leaderships, etc), interest groups and other stakeholders such as the parties’ youth organisations in the debates, but only to the extent they see it necessary. The Irish Constitutional Convention of 2012-2014 which brought together citizens and parlia-

mentarians managed to avoid dominance by politicians (Farrell et al 2020), and inside Europarties it is also paramount that the participatory mechanism is designed for and run by the activists.

Another important aspect would be the commitment of national member parties. While they might be lukewarm about such bottom-up approaches, particularly if the parties are internally divided over the EU, national parties would themselves also benefit from active engagement with supporters. It would make national parties more aware of what their grassroots members think of European issues, and overall make the party organisations more democratic – an aspect which again appeals particularly to younger age groups. The activists could also do important campaign work in EP elections, and this might spill over to national elections or local-level activities. Moreover, if a national party is initially opposed to the idea, activists could put pressure on their parties from the inside. In any case, national parties should not be veto-players: their co-operation is important, but Europarties can also bypass national parties and reach directly the grassroots activists.

3. Concluding discussion

Across Europe citizens, civil society organisations and interest groups are demanding better opportunities for political participation. They want their voices to be heard between elections, and gradually both national and EU decision-makers have established new participatory instruments, such as citizens' initiatives, delibera-

tive experiments, citizens' consultations, and online dialogue channels. However, the progress has been quite uneven and sporadic, with much variation between and within individual EU member states. On the European level, the Conference on the Future of Europe represents the most ambitious effort so far at reaching the citizens, but in general political elites have received criticism for not recognising the potential of newer, more direct democratic mechanisms (Alemanno and Organ 2021)

Particularly younger age cohorts are critical of existing channels of representative democracy. Younger people are also less likely to join political parties and to vote in elections, and hence investment into (online) participation instruments is also an investment in the future. In the EU context such instruments face obvious practical challenges, not least lack of a common language, but previous consultations organised by the Commission and various civil society activists show that EU-level deliberative processes can be implemented meaningfully. If younger people are not eager to join parties, then parties should re-evaluate not just their ideological messages, but also their internal decision-making structures. Political parties are of course democratic organisations, with specific roles assigned to different party organs. Hence, when a party reforms its internal decision-making processes it inevitably means changes to the existing balance of power. However, establishing stronger participation opportunities for grassroots activists should not be viewed as a threat to existing party machinery. The participatory mechanisms outlined

in this paper would not involve any major transfers of power inside the Europarties. Instead, activists can contribute towards a more vibrant, bottom-up party organisation and their viewpoints can improve the quality of party decision-making.

For the Europarties, the biggest question mark concerns the mobilisation of grassroots members. As argued in this paper, much depends on ensuring beforehand that the views of the activists are taken seriously. This is an essential prerequisite for successfully reaching out to the citizens and for making the participatory instrument durable. Europarties should also make the processes as inclusive as possible, so that 'outsiders' can join in the discussions – and subsequently perhaps become actual party members. Both the Europarty and its national member parties would need to invest in informing potentially interested citizens about the mechanisms. For the national member parties, the payoff would be a more active grassroots network that could spill over to national and local politics.

The three alternative models presented in this paper should be viewed as rough sketches or preliminary ideas for engaging with grassroots members. *The Conference on the Future* model is the most demanding to implement, but also the one with the potentially greatest long-term impact. It would provide a continuous mechanism for involving the activists, whereas the *party congress model* and the *campaign model* are geared towards events held every 2-3 years (congress) or five years (EP elections). Yet, the latter two models can also

be seen as complementary, and if adopted together would involve the grassroots activists in the formulation of party policy both during and outside of elections. The consultation process leading to the adoption of the PES manifesto for the 2009 EP elections certainly shows how the activists can be mobilized with positive results. Ultimately decisions about intra-party democracy and giving the activists a stronger role inside the party organisation reflect the values held by European and national party elites. Do they support a more participatory and deliberative version of democracy or is it enough that people can vote in regular elections and join parties? Considering that centre-left parties are particularly struggling to recruit new members, paying more attention to the activists would be a 'progressive' investment into the future.

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