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The Relationships Between Europarties and European Political Groups: Changing Formal and Informal Rules and the Spitzenkandidatur

Petra Ahrens and Cherry Miller

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Abstract

The condition of EU democracy is hotly debated and the European Parliament's political groups and Europarties play an important role in continuing power struggles between European Union institutions. To harness the increased power of both the European Parliament and European citizens, the formal and informal relationships between the political groups and Europarties matter, with the Spitzenkandidatur process as a crucial aspect. Using a dataset of 135 semi-structured interviews, this article looks beneath the formal rules that structure European Parliament's political groups and Europarties. Exploring how MEPs construct these relationships, it discusses leadership, institutionalisation and stances toward European integration as core elements of the relationship between Europarties and political groups in the European Parliament.

Keywords

European Parliament; Europarties; Political groups; Institutionalization; Informal politics

Debates on the current state of democracy in the European Union (EU) have been searing in recent times with the ongoing Article-7-procedures against Hungary and Poland or the Conference on the Future of Europe as important examples. Parties are considered essential for the functioning of democracy, and 'partyness' was a key aspect of European integration (Johansson and Raunio 2019). Yet, in the European Parliament (EP), the role and function of political parties appears more complicated, and Europarties, including their political leaders, remain still relatively unknown (Kelemen 2020; Johansson and Raunio 2019; Gattermann and de Vreese 2022; 2020), even amongst their national member party activists (Johansson and Raunio 2022).

Thus, deciphering the black box of Europarties and political groups as alliances of national party delegations in the EP (hereafter EPGs) and how their connections play out in supranational governance provides important insights into the functioning of supranational party politics. In this article, we examine the formal and informal aspects of Europarty-EPG pairings, MEPs' views on Europarties and the implications of the Spitzenkandidatur process. Our data comprises 135 semi-structured interviews conducted in the EP with MEPs and EP staff during the eighth and ninth legislatures and documents from the Europarties and the political groups such as party manifestos, political group statutes and political statements.

Usually, in national parliaments, parties running in elections will match one-to-one the parliamentary group they constitute if elected. Instead, political group formation is not formally prescribed by Europarties, but relies on the EP Rules of Procedure and entails multiple layers often leading to new or considerably changed political groups (Bressanelli 2014; Ahrens and Kantola 2022). Several political groups are connected with more than one Europarty or have members not belonging to a Europarty (Gómez-Reino 2018; Ahrens and Kantola 2022). Thus, the EP lacks a party-based government as such, and Europarties are less unitary in their formal structures with much weaker parties' influence on policy outcomes (Crum 2022; Almeida 2012). The relationship of the two then raises further questions, underpinned by the assumption that political group status as democratic actors is contested (Kantola and Miller 2021).

With increased powers of the EP, its EPGs and thus potentially also Europarties received more influence at the European level, which raises questions on their relationships. Despite extant research on EPGs (Kreppel 2002; Hix, Noury and Roland 2007; Ahrens, Elomäki and Kantola 2022), the constant formal and informal interactions between Europarties and political groups remain still under-researched (Johansson and Raunio 2019; Calossi and Cicchi 2019). Johansson and Raunio (2022) note 'Europarties and EP political groups are officially independent of each other, but it is nonetheless more realistic to view them as part of the same Europarty organisation', whilst Jansen (1998: 170) noted the 'built in friction' between the Europarty and the EPG. Consequently, the relationship between Europarties and EPGs and the representation of party-based governments in the other EU institutions is less straightforward and creates questions regarding supranational democracy (Ripoll Servent 2018; Brack 2018).

We first theorise the relationship between Europarties and EPGs as one of informal governance in party politics, micropolitics and supranational democratic practices. Then, we sketch out the formal relationship between the two and how it evolved over time, including aspects like representation, resources and self-regulatory instruments. Afterwards, our empirical analysis engages with Europarty and EPG leadership, the level of institutionalisation of the Europarty and attitudes to European integration before concluding with an outlook on future research agendas.

THEORISING EUROPEAN PARTY POLITICS, INFORMAL GOVERNANCE AND MICRO-POLITICS

Extant research has engaged with how supranational party politics developed (Switek 2016, Raunio 2021; Hix and Lord 1997; Bressanelli 2014; Bardi 1994;), followed by a focus on political groups (Kreppel 2002; Hix, Noury and Roland 2007; Ahrens, Elomäki and Kantola 2022). Lately, the cooperation of populist and right-wing parties in political groups received increasing scholarly attention (McDonnell and Werner 2019; Gómez-Reino 2018; Brack 2018), including constitutionalising Europarties in light of EU regulations (Norman and Wolfs 2021; Morijn 2019). Parties and political groups are thus key elements of a parliamentary party-based EU democracy (Westlake 2019; Johansson and Raunio 2019), yet, with effects of their organisational incongruence not fully explored.

Electoral successes and failures of (Euro-)parties and voter-party congruence in the EP are well researched (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Mattila and Raunio 2006). Europarty and political group positions towards European integration vary (Wiesner 2019; Almeida 2012), structured broadly along 'the left/right economic cleavage and the GAL/TAN (Green-Alternative-Libertarian versus Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist)' (Brack 2018: 56; 83). Political groups use different measures to ensure political group cohesion (McElroy and Benoit 2012; 2010; Hix, Noury and Roland 2007), providing large Europarties with several inroads in considerably influencing policymaking given their connections with national heads of government, EPGs and Commission portfolios (Johansson and Raunio 2022). Finally, the 2014-invented Spitzenkandidatur puts Europarty-EPG pairs again centre stage in steering the fate of the EU, and thus the future of supranational democracy (Johansson and Raunio 2022; Hertner 2019; Dunphy and March 2018).

As the only directly elected EU body, the EP and its political groups rooted in Europarties are the cornerstone of supranational democracy and legitimacy shortcomings could challenge the democratic setup. With separate formal rules for Europarties and EPGs, their undeniably strong connections remain unregulated and hence their exact relationships pose an important research gap in EU governance and democracy studies. In this article, we posit that exploring interactions and relationships between Europarties and EPGs requires going beyond the formal rules and interrogating 'informal institutions as socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside the officially sanctioned channel' (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 727).

The concept of informal governance allows us to engage with the coexistence and reciprocal influence of formal and informal arrangements in politics (Christiansen and Neuhold 2013). Regarding the EPG-Europarty relationship this means examining formal regulations for both institutions, their own formal and informal rules, and how their members utilise them in their everyday work. Conceptualising their relationship as one of informal governance allows exploring the 'scopes for action' between Europarties and political groups and what structures their interactions.

Furthermore, such an exploration includes asking about democratic legitimacy; a core concern of studies in informal politics (Reh 2014; Christiansen and Neuhold 2013). Traditionally conceptualised as output legitimacy (effectiveness and performance of policies) and input legitimacy (citizen engagement and governmental responsiveness), Schmidt (2020) provides *throughput legitimacy* as a third dimension. This '"black box" of governance' (Schmidt 2020: 8), comprises the procedural (and democratic) quality of political processes, i.e. ensuring participation, accountability, transparency, inclusion and equality. Variations in Europarty-EPG relationships provide a fruitful setting for investigating these aspects.

Importantly, actors shape formal and informal governance through micro-politics, thereby potentially transposing informal rules into formal ones; the Spitzenkandidatur is one example (Wiesner 2019). Thus, the current state of formal and informal relationships

between Europarties and EPGs and their appearance inside EP everyday politics holds explanatory power for future formal arrangements. Given the different history of EPGs, we furthermore expect that informal rules vary between the groups and imply different democratic practices.

Next to formal and informal rules and practices, we focus on the Spitzenkandidatur process as a recent prime example of deeper cooperation in supranational democracy and moreover the only recent supranational innovation already practiced. Usually investigated as clash between EP, Council and Commission (Peñalver García and Priestley 2015; Heidbreder and Schade 2020; De Wilde 2020), party political informal governance might be more virulent in this process (Wolfs, Put and Van Hecke, 2021; Fabbrini 2015). The ambiguity of article 17(7) Lisbon Treaty triggered fights between EP and Council about nomination responsibilities (Wiesner 2018; Christiansen 2016): the Council proposing a candidate and 'acting by qualified majority' or the EP electing 'the candidate' by 'majority of its component members'. Although article 17(7) conferred the EP a role in determining the next Commission President, the member state governments in the Council and the EP, its political groups and their respective Europarties needed to design the new process (Fabbrini 2015). Instead of triggering transnational political party competition, tensions were fostered by Europarties' claiming it their duty and right to nominate candidates, a broad interpretation of a process designed for EP and Council (Wiesner, 2018; Christiansen 2016: 1007). Europarties nominating candidates and the EPG electing the Commission president is still an informal process and depends on micro-politics in each EPG-Europarty pair; politics we explore in detail below after presenting methods and data.

METHODS AND DATA

While there are several well-suited methodological approaches to understand Europarty-EPG relationships, for instance, regarding voting patterns, election results of parties and MEPs, they provide less information on what it means for MEPs to work in the context of EPGs and their respective Europarty. How MEPs (and staff) use formal and informal rules and practices steers their everyday work regarding EPG and Europarty. Furthermore, in lieu of formal rules regulating the relationship, we expect informal governance is important. Yet, informal aspects cannot be collected via quantitative analysis since actors are often unaware of them themselves.

We use documentary analysis (Treaties, EP Rules of Procedure, Europarty and EPG statutes and websites) to scrutinise formal linkages and memberships. Informal interactions were captured through 135 semi-structured interviews conducted from 2018 to 2022 with MEPs and staff (assistants, political group staff, EP staff) from all political groups and non-attached MEPs. The sample ensured a diversity of member states, genders, seniority and functions. Among the interviewees were eight (deputy) Secretary Generals of the EPGs, who play a pivotal role in managing relationships with Europarties.

Building on grounded theory, the interviews were coded using Atlas.ti. Grounded theory enables generating a meta-theoretical explanation which is grounded in data (Creswell 2013) and provides a 'unified theoretical explanation' (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 107) shaped by the views of interviewees. Importantly, the informal rules were not necessarily described as such by our interviews, but carved out through our in-depth analysis of data. Codes were developed deductively from formal documents and academic literature and inductively from the participants' constructions themselves. Two first-level topical codes, that is, largely descriptive and low inference codes, were team-coded to sort through the abundant dataset. First, the inductive topical code 'Europarties', which was defined as 'how the political group/MEP relates to Europarty'. This included *behavioural* aspects: frequency and opportunities for Europarty contact and *attitudinal* aspects: feelings of relevance of the Europarty and its democratic credentials for MEPs' everyday work. This code was

inductive because the project did not explore Europarties from the outset. Rather, Europarties took on varying significance for the participants. We supplemented this with the deductive topical code 'Spitzenkandidatur' (defined as mentions of the Spitzenkandidatur process and (non) candidates).

Regarding our research questions, two theoretical codes were used in data analysis. These were: *formal interactions* comprising any mentions of statutes, EP Rules of Procedure or else; *informal interactions* defined as any description of routines, habits or processes not included in formal interactions and 'democratic practices' which we define following Schmidt's (2020) definition of 'throughput legitimacy'. Under *informal interactions,* higher order categories (Elliot 2018: 2852) were developed as an outcome of coding from smaller codes. These emergent categories were: leadership, levels of institutionalisation and attitudes towards European integration. The leadership category refers to focused codes: powers, policy leadership and political cohesion. Institutionalisation refers to the focused codes: the age of the Europarty; apparatus such as congresses and summits and ideological cohesion (Bressanelli 2014). Attitudes to EU integration refers to the subcodes of: condition, ends (what it is and should be) and means of achieving European integration.

Each code was cross-compared and analysed along political group lines allowing us to generate a 'thick description' of EPG-Europarty relationships from the perspective within the parliament (Wolfs, Put and Van Hecke 2021: 18).

FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EUROPARTIES AND EPGS

With the shift to direct EP elections in 1979, national parties responded by founding Europarties and the early Christian-conservatives, social-democratic and liberal were swiftly followed by green, regional and later those representing the fringes on both sides of the political spectrum (see Table 1 for overview). The EP Rules of Procedure (EPRoP) regulate political group formation with three criteria: (1) a minimum of 23 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), (2) representing at least seven member states, and (3) demonstrating political affinity. The EPRoP do not regulate relationships with Europarties and the number of Europarty MEPs and all EPG MEPs differs (see Table 1). Furthermore, Calossi and Cicchi (2019: 12-14) show the overlap between Europarty MEPs and EPG MEPs falls from the 2009-2014 to the 2014-2019 legislature. For the 2019-2024 legislature the trend continues for all political groups except for Identity and Democracy, successor of the EPG Europe of Nations and Freedom, and the European Conservatives and Reformists Party.

Table 1: Overview of Europarties represented in EP political groups

Europarty (founding year)	EPG 2019	MEPs Europarty/EPG		
		EPG/Europarty ratio in %		
		2009	2014	2019
Party of European Socialists (PES) (1974)	Socialists & Democrats (S&D)	161/184	181/189	117/146
		87.5%	95.8%	80.1%

Europarty (founding year)	EPG 2019	MEPs Europarty/EPG		
		EPG/Europarty ratio in %		
		2009	2014	2019
European People's Party (EPP) (1976)	European People's Party (EPP)	263/265	206/213	165/173[1]
		99.2%	96.7%	95.4%
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) (1976)	Renew Europe	75/84	50/68	62/98
		89.3%	73.5%	63.3%
European Democratic Party (EDP) (2004)		9/84	7/68	11/98
		10.7%	10.3%	11.2%
European Green Party (EGP)[2] (1984)	Greens/EFA	46/55	37/50	46/73
		83.6%	74%	63.0%
European Free Alliance (EFA)[3] (1981)		6/55	7/50	5/73
		10.9%	14%	6.8%
Party of the European Left (EL) (2004)	The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)	24/35	29/52	16[4]/39
		68.6%	55.8%	41.0%
European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR) (2009)	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	54/55	55/73	48/61 =
		98.2%	75.3%	78.7%
Identity & Democracy Party (ID) (2014)	Identity & Democracy (ID)	n.a.	28/40[5]	59/74
		n.a.	70.0%	89.7%

Sources: authors' own calculation as of June 2021 for 2019-2024; Calossi and Cicchi (2019: 13, 14) for 2009-2014 and 2014-2019.

Financing: Rules and Regulations Over Time

At the 2000 Nice summit, member states approved a Regulation on European Parties and their funding (into force in 2004).[6] Europarties and EPGs were separated formally and spatially: Europarties moved out of EP offices, and instead of being subsidised by EPGs, they since received operational grants from the European Commission. Europarty financing was established as a distinct EP budget line in 2018 with the following criteria: registration with the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (APPF), being represented in the EP by at least one MEP, executing external auditing, having their formal seat in a member state, and representation in at least one quarter of member states and in different assemblies.[7] Through the distinct budget line, Europarties became 'emancipated' from the political groups and their national individual national member parties' subscriptions (Van Hecke, Andrione-Moylan, Brack, Coninck et al. 2018), yet, EPGs receive more advanced resources compared to Europarties (Raunio and Johansson 2022). Moreover, when national party delegations join a political group, a Europarty attached to it can be an 'additional financial incentive', providing parties also access to Europarty resources (McDonnell and Werner 2019: 70).

Legal requirements for financing were further tightened by two regulations from 2014 and 2018 introducing a "EU values compliance mechanism" aiming to hold Europarties (and political groups respectively) accountable to fundamental rights and values enshrined in EU treaty bases; implementation is overseen by the APPF (Morijn 2019: 617; 624-631). Overall, the original dependency of Europarties from political groups disappeared partly and changed their relationship. Moreover, the legal framework arguably created unequal capacities and activities (Van Hecke et al. 2018): Newer Europarties have less resources and capacities than the established ones, which potentially impacts their institutionalisation and relationship with the political group. Meaningful overlap between the Europarty and the political group depends on how active the Europarty is. For example, McDonnell and Werner (2019: 182) note the ECR Europarty (formerly Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists (ACRE)) was inactive outside Brussels, indicating a lower level of institutionalisation.

Self-regulating Relationships of Europarties and EPGs

Political group formation is a core feature of the Europarty-political group relationship with only Europarty members becoming automatically EPG members[8] (Ahrens and Kantola 2022). The changing formal relationship between Europarty and EPG manifests in party statutes. For instance, the EPP Europarty's statutes include the EPG as a constituent element which is a historical statement rather than a membership rule. The EPP Europarty sees the EPG's function as a 'parliamentary wing' (Jansen 1998) as opposed to the Left in the EP which defines not as a parliamentary wing of the European Left (Dunphy and March 2019). The European Green's statutes list national member parties as 'full members' and, if simultaneously EGP member and MEP, individual 'Special Membership', thereby creating a special status for their MEPs. Hertner (2019) found Europarties introduced individual party membership while party membership in EU member states dropped, yet, participatory rights differ considerably between Europarties and their grassroot members lack powers. Overall, Europarties 'essentially remain élite-driven organizations' with national parties as the key players (Hertner 2019: 501).

Europarties and EPGs developed formal rules and practices for their interactions. Party congresses are the highest decision-making body of the Europarties and the space to agree on resolutions, supranational election programs and manifestos to political groups. Indeed most Europarties produced integrated election programmes since the EP elections in 2009 (Wiesner 2019: 190). Often, EPG leaders are invited to give an address and in turn, Europarty leaders may be invited to EPG meetings or the Leaders' conference in pre-council summits, with potentially substantial effects on Intergovernmental Conferences and European Council Summits (Raunio 2021: 364). We found considerable overlap

between Europarties and EPGs in the governance of EPP, ECR, ID, EGP, for instance, as treasurers, or political group leaders holding *ex officio* positions in the Europarty bureaus and in their associated political foundations. The composition of the bureaus of Europarties can be highly politicised and seen as a litmus test of how comfortable a delegation is in a group, by the institutional responsibility taken on (Michalopoulos 2021). Likewise, Europarties and EPGs have 'decades of accumulated experience from building networks and coalitions in IGCs and inter-institutional bargaining rounds' (Johansson and Raunio 2022).

Whilst Europarties produce manifestos and resolutions, they are not policy-seeking in a straightforward way, because political groups form compromises to reach a majority in the EP. Instead, they 'serve as important arenas for the diffusion of ideas and policy coordination' (Raunio 2021: 362). Parties in a Europarty may also pursue side-agreements to reaffirm values, for example the Visegrad countries in the EPP. The policy relationship matters for democracy, if the relationship between EPGs and Europarties links political interests horizontally across the Union (Raunio 2021: 350).

SPITZENKANDIDATUR PROCESS

The candidature to the Commission President is mentioned in Europarties' statutes, internal regulations and charters with regard to electoral organs (EPP 2015, Article 16, Article 18; PES 2018, Article 3, Article 25.1; ALDE 2019a, chapter IV, Article 15 (e); ALDE 2019b, Subsection V, 10; EDP Statutes Article 17; European Free Alliance 2021 p.2). In comparison, the PES statute puts the most emphasis on transparency and competitiveness, whilst the EFA stresses democratic elections to the Commission Presidency. In 2014, Five Europarties – EPP, PES, ALDE, EGP and EL – selected one (or two) candidates. Eurosceptic parties 'saw this development as too "federalist" and refused to appoint Spitzenkandidaten' (Lefkofridi and Katsanidou 2018: 1469).

Within the EP, the Spitzenkandidatur consolidated the EP's pro-integrationist 'grand coalition' (Christiansen 2016: 1007). Nevertheless, there are hidden tensions in the Europarty-EPG relationship: Europarties nominate candidates in elections, while the EPG with the majority of seats provides the Commission president who then should be elected (together with all Commissioners) by EPGs securing a majority of votes. Given decreasing shares of Europarty MEPs in the majority of EPGs and some EPGs comprising several Europarties (see Table 1), future EPs may face interesting democratic challenges, for instance, for issues of 'vertical linkage' (Raunio 2021: 349). In such a setting, it is unclear what happens if an EPG holds the majority of EP seats, but its dominating Europarty received less votes than a competing one or if the EPG comprises two Europarties, which would in effect mean no majority of seats for any of the two. Who will be in the position to claim the next Commission president: the Europarty winning the majority of votes or the EPG having the majority of seats? Thus, next to the formal rules for Europarties and EPGs, informal governance between the two can become ever more important for EU democracy, particularly for contested and non-binding procedures such as the Spitzenkandidatur.

MEPs, EUROPARTIES, EPGs: INTERACTING FORMAL AND INFORMAL ARRANGEMENTS

Next to formal overlaps between the EPGs and Europarties, further conflicts arise in everyday interactions. From our interview data, we found three constructions structuring the relationships between political groups and Europarties: leadership, the level of institutionalization of the Europarty and attitudes to European integration. Building on our semi-structured interviews, we interrogate simultaneously the views of 'ordinary' MEPs

about 'their' Europarty and EPG and the Spitzenkandidatur as a particularly valuable case for exploring Europarty-EPG interactions.

Leadership, Coordination and Individual Members

The first theme structuring the relationship between EPGs-Europarty relationships was the powers, proclivities and relationships between those in Europarty and EPG leadership positions and everyday members. Formally, we know several MEPs and political group staff like Secretary Generals hold leadership positions in the Europarty. Switching between MEP and Europarty positions is not uncommon. Europarties are larger than EPGs, so leaders of the Europarties should formally have more powers. However, informally, we know less about how this works *in practice* and the views of MEPs and staff in non-political leadership positions. Tensions here were most pronounced for the EPP.

Given the heterogeneity of membership in political groups and Europarties, political leadership is key for political cohesion. One MEP felt the EPP Europarty did not have much capacity to discipline national delegations who deviated ideologically, such as Fidesz and therefore 'guaranteeing the, overarching, cohesion in the political party' which was further tested when physical meetings were prohibited during Covid (EPP MEP M 120121; see also Renew Staff M 120221). Political leaders as 'unifiers' were described as important, albeit strong regarding Fidesz. In 2019 Fidesz was originally only suspended from the EPP Party, before leaving both Europarty and EPG 'voluntarily' in 2021, pre-empting threats of being thrown out permanently (Brzozowski and Makszimov 2021).

A senior member of the ID EPG suggested high profile cooperation between the group and Europarty leaders was mutually beneficial to show transnational cooperation from a movement to a party:

> The link is direct and more direct than before even. Before it was the group and the movement it was quite far away and we didn't know exactly how it worked to get what kind of material we could transfer to the party but now we are working very well together. Especially Mr. Zanni and the President met in Antwerp to show that the European party, the ID party, is very well organised now and can show off with a good working team and a good working capacity to organise. So it works well. (ID MEP M 120320)

Administrative leadership and personnel overlaps result in designated responsibilities. Some EPG (Deputy) Secretary Generals are responsible for 'relationships with external partners', including the Europarties. Furthermore, a former Secretary General noted 'tensions between the leading figures automatically spreads to those around them' and especially to staff (Jansen 1998: 175). As for EPP, inter-staff mobility between EPG and Europarty and interactions with leaders were often highlighted. Former Europarty staff, now EPG staff, identified critical actors as 'granddad figures' and active 'kick-ass' women in the Europarties (EPP APA F 160320). EPG staff with an individual EPP party membership constructed themselves as supranational party actors. Nevertheless, some felt disillusioned by the long-term official EPP position on the Hungarian Fidesz. Meanwhile, a member of GUE/NGL described the European Left as a 'messy organisation' (GUE/NGL Staff M 240220), indicating no direct attachment to the party via the EPG.

Policy leadership in EPGs and Europarties is important for ideology and policies. Staff described the benefit of being able to draw on formal resolutions adopted at an EPP Party Congress regarding policy development: 'Well actually we already have that, this is nothing new. You can't object, your name is beside it already, so we do lean on that' (EPP APA F 160320). Regarding programmatic and policy development, PES moved from a confederation to a party in 1992, meaning a common programme was developed. However, in practice, S&D MEPs develop positions on more 'concrete issues' and vote 'in very specific issues every week' whereas PES deals with 'more long-term and fundamental

political positions' and this coordination is achieved before the council meetings when PES meets with the leader of the S&D group (S&D MEP M 271120).

How do these differences in the roles, relationships and powers of the leadership play out in the selection, election and significance of Spitzenkandidatur for political groups? Previous Commission presidents were always prominent national politicians, all of them with leadership positions like prime minister. Many of the candidates in 2014 and 2019 originated from the EP political groups and never held a prominent position in national or supranational politics (Peñalver García and Priestley 2015). Despite discussions about 'fitting' candidates from member states, in particular in 2014 (Peñalver García and Priestley 2015), many candidates were recruited from political groups and their standing vis-a-vis the Council members needs to be scrutinized as a factor for Commission president proposals. Indeed, De Wilde (2020: 51) suggests successful candidates in 2024 will be 'charismatic polyglot individuals, with credible executive experience' and GUE/NGL's candidates suffered in this respect.

Regarding political leadership, the 2019 Spitzenkandidatur process was important for the EPP as likely victors, yet the EPP party faced tensions despite being well organized and having sufficient resources to campaign in capitals. Two MEPs, former Finnish prime minister Alexander Stubb and German Manfred Weber (then EPG group leader) put themselves forward as candidates. The different roles and experiences allowed Stubb to present himself as an outsider, whilst Weber implicitly drew on his position as leader of the largest group, promoting his candidacy as 'an extension of European-style coalition politics, in which it is only natural that the leader of the largest group in parliament should be asked to lead the government' (Herszenhorn and De La Baume 2018).

Our interviewees suggested that not only was the selection of candidates untransparent and almost undemocratic at an EU level, but at national level, there was also a lack of communication regarding candidate ambitions:

> [In the ALDE Party] I think it is mainly Verhofstadt and mainly him who tries to get the people. Because when they had the meeting, I have heard that the ALDE Party leader, Baalen, was criticized, and there was no order. Actually I don't know how it is, it is very undemocratic. [One candidate is] very competent … And I have heard that she has given her permission, and it's between her and the party leader. I think nobody knows. Not the party. They don't know in the party that she might be the Spitzenkandidat. That's interesting. (ALDE MEP F 210219)

This mystique around candidate ambitions and recruitment was also in GUE/NGL when Mary Lou Robinson (Sinn Fein) had been approached when Sinn Fein were electorally successful nationally (GUE/NGL Staff M 210220). Interestingly, Sinn Fein is not a member, observer or partner party of the Party of the European Left.

The election of Von Der Leyen fed into considerations within Renew of distributing other leadership positions:

> In the run-up to the adoption of the Commission's programme, [we've said] that we want a Conference on the Future of Europe, and we want that to be chaired by a member of the Renew Group, a liberal, ideally Guy Verhofstadt in my view, who would then take a look at the whole Spitzenkandidatur system and the whole process of, how democratic and accountable the creation of the commission is and...even more directly involving the citizens of Europe, not just the political groups and the elected MEPs. (Renew MEP M 131219).

Interestingly, the MEP speaks about the role of the EPGs, but not the Europarties, in the Spitzenkandidatur, although the latter put forward candidates.

Different from the previous EPGs, the selection procedure for the Spitzenkandidatur was largely designed by the ECR political group (Wolfs, Put and Van Hecke 2021: 10), not the Europarty. The process lacked formal democratic rules and allowed a former leader of the political group to emerge as the lead candidate:

> We didn't have a vote because there was only one candidate who basically put themselves forward and wanted to do it, and so it was just acclamation of that particular candidate. We didn't have a process. We had a candidate who was a previous president of the group, who was a compromise president in the group when we had trouble, who represented a smallish member state. It ticked all those boxes. (ECR MEP M 310119).

In 2014, the Greens elected their lead candidates by online voting, but as De Wilde (2020: 41) suggests they in 2019 'resorted to only giving party insiders a voice in the selection of their preferred candidate, narrowing down the scope and public resonance of the selection of Spitzenkandidaten'.

Furthermore, administrative leaders might informally engage in Spitzenkandidatur campaigns. A member of group staff identified underexploited levers of official representation in the Europarty's bureau and they had a 'role to play' to ensure the national parties are informed and prepared for the Spitzenkandidat to put diverse candidates forward and to address gender equality 'first', 'well in advance' and 'not only in the last minute' (S&D Staff M 290419). Political group staff were also asked by administrative leaders to 'step in' to put out fires and provide 'crisis communications', despite simultaneously being prohibited from the campaign itself, due to separate funding sources for different Europarties represented in the EPG (GUE/NGL Staff M 210220).

Regarding policy leadership, the S&D political group's leader, Udo Bullman's office had developed a 'battle plan' for the 2019 European Elections, which was presented at a group meeting as a good testing tool to see 'which candidate aligns up first with the battle plan'. However, the proposal was implicitly criticized as not adhering to S&D democratic principles, because it wasn't being opened up for amendments and solely voted upon by the EPG. Therefore the group may develop its own methods to hold the Spitzenkandidat accountable, but the content of these methods itself may be subject to exclusionary practices.

Level of Institutionalisation

The second theme structuring the relationship between EPGs and their Europarties was their degree of institutionalisation. Some MEPs enter the EP with pre-established links with their Europarty and this helps their everyday work in the political group and networks and forming compromises and negotiations within the group (S&D MEP F 300119; Renew Group Staff M 120221). Whilst the S&D was criticised as elite driven, tensions were more pronounced for GUE/NGL and ECR.

The ECR political group is younger than the ECR Party which was formed in 2009 as Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists (ACRE) and recently changed to the name ECR Party. For the ECR any meaningful overlap between the Europarty and the political group depends on how active the Europarty is across Europe (McDonnell and Werner 2019: 182). Steven (2020: 84) sees the ECR Party as serving a *global* purpose for networking and convening around the intellectual idea of Conservatism, rather than policy development. Links between MEPs and the ECR party are not as strong as for other Europarties. One MEP stated 'I've never been to any [ACRE] meetings … this doesn't [affect everyday working]' (ECR MEP F 210219).

Europarties' congresses are key to institutionalization, though they became compromised during Covid. Next to EPP, PES is the oldest Europarty with long traditions of party congresses and well-established roots in all member states. However, when asked about

the meaning of the Europarty, and its congress for the MEP's everyday work, two MEPs spoke about the different experiences of 'ordinary' or 'normal' MEPs 'not necessarily included in this mechanism' and has 'not so much' relevance 'to be frank' and the EPG 'elite' who belonged to PES (S&D MEP M 161018; S&D MEP M 020320). A part of this originated from the unclear mechanisms for being a delegate for the PES congress for example, who come from national parties (S&D MEP M 020320). Indeed, one MEP concurred: 'I'm not aware of having been invited to one' (S&D MEP M 020320). Conversely, an MEP felt empowered to be actively involved in PES and she framed her involvement along a continuum of participation of MEPs, saying: 'it's not enough to simply turn up to committees if you want to be effective in the parliament' (S&D MEP F 300119). She suggested she was given responsibilities by S&D based on her track record of being involved in PES activities.

A respondent in the ALDE party at the end of their parliamentary career, contrasted the ALDE Party congress where 'declarations' were made with other priorities to use their power as MEP:

> If I were young it might be possible that I would like to go. But, I have been so many years in politics and I know that the party congress is. They make declarations, and it's not always, they way you, I want to use my power. (ALDE MEP F 210219)

Meanwhile if there are multiple Europarties attached to the group, then Deputy Secretary Generals must be vigilant not to show favouritism to one and will often abstain from all of their congresses.

Tensions emerging from formal rules around political group formation can informally induce destabilization in both Europarties and EPGs. Although Europarties and political groups are formally connected, their composition is not identical, quite contrary often (Calossi and Cicchi, 2019). Political groups build on Europarties but also include non-party members, split of Europarty members across political groups, and sometimes national delegations switching political groups despite their Europarty membership (Ahrens and Kantola, 2022). Nevertheless, one MEP constructed the EPP Party as unwieldy and difficult to coordinate, because 'the EPP party is of course way bigger' (EPP MEP M 120121). Both Renew's group leader, Dacian Ciolos' party and then Stéphane Séjourné's En Marche are not in the ALDE Party, but are a cornerstone of the new Renew EPG. Similarly, an ECR MEP, despite their national party being a member, criticized ACRE because of the overall right wing outlook: 'I think they're a ghastly right-wing organisation. And I think [ACRE] includes the AKP. Erdogan is in that, I mean, they are very right-wing, and people like the Secretary General, who campaigned to leave very strongly' (ECR MEP F 210219; see Steven 2020: 85).

The Greens/EFA EPG, home to two different Europarties, the European Green Party (EGP) and European Free Alliance (EFA), constructed the EPG as an informative tool about shared values. Because the Greens are electorally successful predominantly in Northwestern Europe, the Europarty was also used to develop the reach and positioning of the political group in South and Eastern Europe (Greens/EFA MEP F 100320). The relationship between GUE/NGL and its various Europarties - the Party of the European Left, Nordic Green Left Alliance (NGLA), Now the People! - is arguably more fraught. When asked about the relationship between the Europarty and the group, an MEP said: 'You are very painstaking, you know us well, huh' (GUE/NGL MEP M 231020), implying internal tensions. Leadership is important for institutionalisation. In the GUE/NGL co-presidency, Martin Schirdewan's German Die Linke is a member of the Party of the European Left, while Manon Aubry's La France Insoumise is not and aligned with Now the People!. However, according to one interviewee: 'They are backing for example these European forums on the European Left both so I would not say that there's a big difference between the former presidency and the current presidency' (GUE/NGL MEP M 231020).

How do these differences play out in the selection, election and significance of the Spitzenkandidatur? Similar to EPP, PES had sufficient resources to fund tours of the capitals, something harder for smaller Europarties. The Spitzenkandidatur was of lower importance to the ECR MEPs as compared to aforementioned EPGs, probably because ACRE struggled with its lack of ready-made transnational cooperation and infrastructure for events. As for Identity and Democracy (I&D), one of the youngest Europarties and EPGs in the EP after restructuring the previous Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), the relationship is unsurprisingly much in flux and our interviewees had not any comment on the Spitzenkandidatur process. One MEP described the relevance of the Europarty for his everyday work and national party in merely pragmatic terms:

> Nothing very much actually … it was very logical that we also join with the political party all over Europe, the ID Party. So, it's only some impact for the everyday work. If there's coming some events or political campaigns, connected with European level, you can use this ID Party, European party for these political events or conferences or campaigns. But not everyday work. So it means that they don't really know about it and that's why I think there is no really big impact. (I&D MEP M 130320)

Despite the formal institution of individual membership, in the EPP's congress, only delegates, rather than individual members, could vote on the outcome in a secret ballot (De Wilde 2020: 41). Informally, the national delegations often decide who they will campaign for. The EPP member parties in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, and Latvia were large supporters of Stubb, albeit small national delegations in the EPP EPG. For PES and S&D, the congress provides an interactive forum for nominating the lead candidate with special facilitating roles by MEPs:

> The group has delegates to the congress and of course the MEPs are the ones that move around. Know everybody. Talk to everybody much more than the national party delegations do in frequently participating European level areas. So the group's influence on the choice of the Spitzenkandidat the lead candidate is not insignificant. The national executive of our national party looked asked: 'who is Frans Timmermans? Is he okay?' and I was saying yes. He's a very good choice. So you informally influence your own party as well pretty often. (S&D MEP M 271120)

The 2019 Spitzenkandidatur process was a crucial aspect of Renew's political group formation. Macron favoured transnational lists to lead candidates. According to De Wilde (2020: 41), 'ALDE's half- hearted participation' in the Spitzenkandidatur process was to 'woo Macron's party to join them after the election'. Increasing the Renew group size promised political stability and influence.

Stances on European Integration

The final theme we found that structured the relationship between EPGs and their Europarties was key actors' constructions of the condition, ends and means of European integration. Tensions were more pronounced in ECR and EFDD.

Regarding the condition of European integration, an EPP MEP said citizen knowledge of the EPP EPG is 'very little', though suggested in their Central Eastern European member state, the EPP Party was slightly better known' (EPP MEP F 120320). MEPs' involvement in PES Europarty activity was constrained by Euroscepticism: 'I've never been to [a PES Congress] … we stopped doing [away days] on purpose...for the Daily Mail reasons...we never go on, S&D corporate things anymore (S&D MEP M 161018). The MEP notably uses a discourse of 'corporate' rather than campaigning.

Meanwhile, several UK MEPs considered the Europarties as a key connection to EU affairs after the UK's withdrawal.

> I had never been a member of ALDE party until I was elected as an MEP. I am a member. I was wondering about going for a seat on the congress or the council. I think it's inevitable that relationships will very much walk us around it. (Renew MEP F 240220; see also Greens/EFA MEP F 210120).

Leaders' interpretations of the concepts of Eurorealism and Euroscepticism as ends, can explain the differences in the significance of the Spitzenkandidatur. The attitudes towards Europarties and the Spitzenkandidatur of Jan Zahradril (ECR group leader 2011, ACRE chair and lead candidate 2019) and Daniel Hannan (former MEP and ACRE Secretary General until 2018) differ. Hannan, a Eurosceptic, prioritises looking outwards to sister parties around the world and to Eastern Europe than inwards towards the EU (Steven 2020: 87). One interviewee stated 'we have a problem because we don't agree with the Spitzenkandidat procedure. We think it's ridiculous and against the treaties' (ECR MEP M 310119). Meanwhile, some ECR MEPs would nonetheless debate the Spitzenkandidatur in their own countries, and whilst not delivering a Commission President, for them, it stimulated debate in candidates' member states (ECR MEP M 040320).

Dissolved after the 2019 elections, our interviewees from EFDD were the most critical of Europarties who were understood as an artificial construction:

> We are only forced into these ludicrous parties by the EU, we don't believe in them, that's one of the reasons why we're leaving. This place has nothing to do with democracy and everything to do with how the EU wants the world to be. They want to dictate what party you're a member of, what you think and now they even say, you can't be a member of a grouping if we don't like the way you think. So basically it's the thought police, this is a dictatorship. (EFDD MEP M 290119_3)

How do differences in institutionalisation play out in the selection, election and significance of lead candidates? De Wilde (2020) suggests Europarties' inability to successfully transform the 2019 European elections into 'first-order' elections contributed to Manfred Weber (EPP) being unable to assume the position of Commission President. Immediately after the 2019 elections, the mainstream political groups in the EP insisted to only elect one of their lead candidates and not an 'external' candidate; until Ursula von der Leyen was proposed. The interest of national parties was astonishingly low despite the most powerful EU position at disposal; the biggest attention occurred in the lead candidates' home countries (Gattermann and de Vreese 2020). Some national Europarty members, for instance from the UK, even avoided engaging in the Spitzenkandidatur as early as 2014 as EU membership was already too contested (Braun and Popa 2018). Simultaneously, the Spitzenkandidatur process was rejected by Macron's Renew in favour of creating more transnational lists.

Differing constructions on the means and ends of European integration affected what MEPs prioritised: Europarties as important for supranational democracy for presenting candidates to the electorate or political groups as crucial parliamentary actors for oversight and voting:

> It is very important to keep the notion that in the end the leader of the European Commission has to be elected in the European Parliament. That is very important the parliament has a democratic role of scrutiny. (S&D MEP M 231220)

Despite the Green Europarty nominating Ska Keller and Bas Eickhout, interviewees shared critical views of Spitzenkandidatur's fate, notably the anti-democratic nature of Ursula von der Leyen's election in 2018:

> That was a failure of European politics … the argument that there you could make is that "this is how democracy works" … and in fact, what you have then is a messy compromise. (Greens/EFA MEP F 210120)

The EFDD EPG was composed of two large delegations. One EFDD respondent replied: 'What is a Spitzenkandidat, I've never heard of one, what is a Spitzenkandidat? We put Nigel Farage but more likely that, Frans Timmermans is going to have a sex change, don't you think?' (EFDD, MEP M 290119). Meanwhile, the 14 Five Star MEPs claimed to have voted for von der Leyen, contributing to her nine-vote-majority. A senior Five Stars MEP, Fabio Castaldo suggested in a speech[9] the Spitzenkandidatur system was elite-driven by parachuting candidates into localities, overriding civil society representation.

In sum, leadership, institutionalisation and constructions of European integration are significant for how 'everyday' MEPs and staff engage with 'their' Europarty and for supranational democracy more broadly. Despite the Spitzenkandidatur's democratic potentials, we find misunderstanding, informal coordination, and at worst - a lack of affective engagement. Given how important congresses are to the linkage between the Europarty, EPG and Spitzenkandidatur, it is surprising that engagement is uneven, leading to the perception among 'ordinary' MEPs that the Spitzenkandidatur is elite-driven. Likewise, the means and ends of European integration create tensions between Europarties and EPGs and this is further nuanced with internal debates within political groups, such as the Eurorealists and Euroscepticists of ECR.

The Spitzenkandidatur was developed as an informal rule by key federalist actors at a time of legitimacy crisis for the EU, thereby showing the relationships between the Europarties and EPGs are important. However, given our findings, it is unlikely the Spitzenkandidatur will fundamentally change the relationship between Europarties and EPGs and it remains to be seen how both will restructure their strategies towards the Spitzenkandidatur in 2024.

CONCLUSION

This article provided important insights into the everyday informal governance of EPG-Europarty relationships, its micropolitics and the democratic practices related to them. While previous literature covered their development and implications for EU integration (Switek 2016; Raunio 2021; Hix and Lord 1997; Bressanelli 2014; Bardi 1994), our article contributes by detailing the formal and informal relationships and their value for everyday politics in the EP.

We found the formal and informal links between the two have significant democratic effects, especially regarding the Spitzenkandidatur process. While Europarties are important for supranational democracy for presenting candidates to the electorate, the European Commission and its president are ultimately elected by EPGs who secure the necessary majority in votes. Regarding 'throughput legitimacy' (Schmidt 2020), executive accountability and transparency is at stake - contingent on whether the Spitzenkandidatur could become a power base for EU integration and helps increase citizen participation and inclusion. Moreover, the patterns observed for the Spitzenkandidatur may apply to other institutional proposals such as transnational lists. In May 2022 the EP adopted its position on reforming the European Electoral Act, including establishing transnational lists by either a European political party, a European association of voters or by other European electoral entity. Given these different entities, it remains unclear whether, for instance, non-Europarty members could join a Europarty list or, once elected, if national parties can join any EPG despite competing on a different transnational list.

Given the Spitzenkandidatur and transnational lists are topics for the Conference on the Future of Europe, relationships between EPGs and Europarties may be recast in ways

relevant to EU democracy (Johansson and Raunio 2022). Currently the whole system relies on informal rules and practices between Europarties and EPGs, thus with in-built deficiencies regarding democratic transparency and accountability for citizens and national parties. Without formal rules and the discrepancy in the number of Europarty representatives and EPG MEPs, the election of the Commission president – even without the publicly dominating clashes between EP and Council (Heidbreder and Schade 2020; De Wilde 2020) – could cause deadlock. This could materialize in case the EPG with the majority of seats refuses to elect a preferred Council candidate who can claim the majority of Europarty votes. Unquestionably, the Spitzenkandidatur system is complex and under constant flux, but, given upcoming changes to the European Electoral Act, is set to stay.

Then again, our findings show that despite Europarties' new powers in the Spitzenkandidatur, this topic was unimportant to MEPs and Europarties were even framed as 'external actors' in EPG (Deputy) Secretary Generals portfolios. Instead, according to our interviewees, Europarty-EPG relationships are structured along three themes: leadership, the level of institutionalisation of the Europarty and attitudes to European integration.

Our qualitative approach covering the views of MEPs and EP staff invites further research on Europarty-EPG interactions from different angles. Surely, investigating the counterpart, the organization of the Europarty regarding their EPG, the role of their leadership in shaping EPGs and thus EU policymaking, and how they engage with EU citizen's would provide crucial insights in supranational party politics and EU democracy. Connected to this, quantitative analysis of voting cohesion for Europarty vs EPG MEPs, thereby scrutinizing the role of national party delegations for Europarties and EPGs would help to understand the development of true supranational Europarties. This would include examining the impact of Europarty programmes on national election manifestos or, through Social Network Analysis, exploring party-political networks. Likewise, how new non-Europarty EPG members such as En Marche in Renew or leaving ones like Fidesz in EPP shape the Europarty were not studied.

Overall, our research supports recent literature in that the parliamentarisation of EU politics came to a halt or is, at least, always dependent on member states governments willingness to share powers (Crum 2022). The more informal governance of Europarty-EPG ties prove this further and suggest to trace democratic legitimacy across these multiple layers, i.e. linkages between Europarties, their national members and how each are represented in governments but also EPGs.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Petra Ahrens, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, FI-33014 Tampere, Finland [petra.ahrens@tuni.fi]

Cherry Miller, University of Glasgow, 1213 Adam Smith Building, Glasgow, G12 8RS, United Kingdom [Cherry.Miller@Glasgow.ac.uk]

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Petra Ahrens: Conceptualisation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Cherry Miller: Investigation, formal analysis, writing - original draft, writing – review and editing.

ENDNOTES

[1] The 165 MEPs are calculated after the Hungarian Fidesz left EPP in March 2021. It includes three independent MEPs where it is unclear whether they are still individual members of the EPP Party.

[2] The European Greens Statutes list 55 MEPs as 'Special Members'.

[3] The European Free Alliance political group part has three MEPs from ECR Party and one EL Party MEP.

[4] Excluding La France Insoumise (6), AKEL (2) or KSCM (1) who are observer parties.

[5] 2014 data for ID's predecessor Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF)/Europe of Nations and Freedom group.

[6] Regulation (EC) No 2004/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding. OJ L 297, 15.11.2003.

[7] Online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/contracts-and-grants/en/political-parties-and-foundations. Accessed 10 September 2019.

[8] Some Europarty members sign up for a different EPG than their Europarty (see Table 1).

[9] Online: https://www.fabiomassimocastaldo.it/sistema-degli-spitzenkandidaten-non-sia-paracadute-politici-senza-consenso-occasione-allargare-dibattito-democratico-partecipazione/

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