

PARTY SYSTEMS



SUPRANATIONAL PARTY SYSTEM OF THE EU

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The article confirms the hypothesis that a multiplicity of parties of the European and national levels forms the party system of the European Union (EU). The authors describe the main characteristics of Europarties and political groups comprised of them as key actors in the European Parliament's (EP) political and legislative processes. The authors adopt the institutional approach and make use of the tools of the comparative, structural, and functional analyses. Special attention is paid to the 'two-tier' structure — the connection between national and supranational institutions — as a key feature of the European Union's party system. The study is based on the European Parliament framework laws, election results, Europarties' political programmes, as well as on the comparison of the composition of the Europarties and the EU bodies. The analysis provides a new perspective on the major processes and contradictions in the functioning of the European Parliament and demonstrates that the transformation of the EU from an intergovernmental association to a (con)federation has not been completed yet.

Key words: European parliament, Europarty, political group, party system, electoral system

Amid the development of regional economic and political alliances, it is increasingly important to study political institutions responsible for representation, harmonisation of interests, and decision-making at supranational level within intergovernmental integration. Transboundary economic cooperation provides the impetus for regional political integration. However, organising optimal decision-making processes at supranational level remains a problem.

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This necessitates studying the development of the European Parliament (EP) and the role of political parties comprising the supranational party system of the European Union, ensuring decision-making, and legitimising these decisions based on interest representation.

Structural and functional features of Europarties

Key agents of political process taking place in the European Parliament are political groups consisting of European-level parties (Europarties)¹. Europarties are umbrella organisations bringing together national parties committed to a common ideology and political programme [14]. Individual membership in Europarties is also possible for members of national parliaments and the EP.

During EP elections, voters elect only national parties — some of them constitute Europarties, others act without the support of the latter. National parties compete for votes allocated to each country within the national apportionment of MEP seats. Thus, election campaigns focus primarily on national agendas [15].

Europarties are financed by the EU funds and private donations. They have the right to campaign at European level². Funds are allocated in line with the objectives stated in the political programmes of Europarties.

A key characteristic of Europarties is their two-tier structure, which includes national and supranational components. National parties serve as channels for recruiting members of the political elite, who interact with electoral groups in EU member states through representing their interests. Further, national parties set up Europarties, which influence the formation of coalitions and the functioning of the EU governing bodies.

This particularity is a result of the conditions, in which Europarties develop in the EU — an intergovernmental association, which has created a system of supranational coordinating and governing institutions. In this sense, the European Parliament — as well as the European-level party-building process — is of a partly artificial nature. Its emergence was not a result of political struggle and its gradual institutionalisation, which shaped modern institutions of parliamentarism and political parties. It is a product of agreements between states and political elites, a result of ‘political engineering’ at the supranational level [6; 10]. Thus, the question of long-term stability and independence of supranational EU institutions remains relevant.

Increasing international integration requires securing its legitimacy from citizens of European countries, which necessitated the transition to direct EP

¹ For the first time, the notion of Europarty was introduced in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992: ‘Political parties at European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union’ (Article 138a). The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) laid down Europarty financing rules. The Treaty of Nice (2001) specified that ‘The Council... shall lay down the regulations governing political parties at European level and in particular the rules regarding their funding’.

² This right is governed by EU Regulation No. 1624/2007 (2007). Allocated funds cover administrative costs and expenditure relating to technical support, meetings, research, awareness campaign, etc.

elections in 1979. This provided the impetus for political struggle and coalition formation in the framework of European integration institutions. As European level coalitions of national parties, Europarties had been developing long before their formalisation in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty.

In the 1970s, the first three Europarties emerged. These were the European People's Party, Party of European Socialists, European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party. They did not have a strict organisational structure; their coordination was carried out by regular congresses. The weakness of party hierarchy was reflected in Europarty manifestos, often featuring vague or openly populist statements. Gradually, the political party spectrum became diverse, as new Europarties emerged (the far-right, the green, regionalists, etc.). The new Europarties strived to reach a coordinated position for EP elections. At the same time, due to a weak organisational structure and vagueness of their political programmes, Europarties largely depended on the supranational institutions of the EU [26].

Despite the rather low political status of Europarties, they fulfilled a number of important functions, including raising awareness of European processes among voters in the course of EP elections, mitigating differences between national parties at European level, etc. As Europarties developed, they started to coordinate and structure their ideological platforms, thus contributing to the formation of the EP based on the political and ideological rather than the national principle³.

In effect, the gradual convergence of national parties brought together by a similar ideology in the framework of European integration processes has been taking place since the establishment of the EP. The transition to direct EP elections in 1979 provided the final impetus for these processes.

In 1990—2000, as European integration was developing and Europarties were being formalised, the objective of coordination was replaced by that of creating a common election platform and political branding. Europarties' function of forming party groups in the EP crystallised during that period.

Without Europarties, the process of party grouping in the EP would be chaotic, the configuration of groups would change after each election, and parliamentary discussion would be dominated by national agendas. At the same time, Europarties still lack direct interaction with voters, and this fact reduces their role in legitimising of the European Parliament. Special attention should be paid to the transformation of national parties into Europarties in new EU member states. The political competition space expands with each new wave of European integration and new parties are created [3—5].

The functions of Europarties are not limited to the formation of political groups. Europarties can influence EU governing bodies and decision-making processes in several ways. Firstly, Europarties participate in coordination meetings with heads of state and government (influence on the European Council). Secondly, the positions of Europarties and affiliated European

³ Nation-based grouping of parties in the EP is impossible due to the institutional barrier requiring that each EP party group include MEPs from at least seven EU countries. Structuring of political movements at the supranational level make it possible for Europarties to set up party efficient groups through amalgamating several Europarties with a similar political and ideological platform.

Commission members are coordinated. Europarties also influence the political process through supporting their EC candidates [27]. The Treaty of Lisbon governs the right of Europarties holding the majority of votes to put up a candidate for the position of President of European Commission. In 2014, the European People's Party used this option to nominate Donald Tusk for the position of President of European Council. Thus, Europarties can influence EU governing bodies through delegating their members. A comparative analysis of Europarty representation in EU supranational structures is one of the indicators taken into account when evaluating their influence (table 1).

A comparative analysis shows that there are four leading parties (EPP, PES, ALDE, AECR) accounting for 70% seats in the European Parliament. Members of the Big Four hold 29 out of 30 seats in the European Council and all Commissioner Offices in the European Commission. The other 11 Europarties account for approximately 20% MEP seats and 1 member of the European Council.

The financing of Europarties out of EU funds is rather limited (the largest Europarty — the EPP — receives approximately 8m euros and the smallest — AENM — only 0.35m; these moneys cover three-year salary of a MEP [13]). However, Europarties can accept private donations of 12,000 euro per year [11] and donations from national parties, if the total sum does not exceed 40% of their annual budget.

From the perspective of internal structure of Europarties is characterised by a weak structure suggesting that PMs can vote in the European Parliament and adoption of legislation depends on compromises both between and within political groups. This reduces the significance of the Europarties, which cannot have a top-down influence on election results. At the same time, this does not reduce the risk of a parliamentary crisis, when strictly disciplined groups would block each other's initiatives.

Therefore, one of the key functions of Europarties is taking part in the legislative process through forming political groups in the EP. MEPs join such groups in accordance with their party affiliation [7]. Forming a political group requires at least 25 MEPs representing at least one fifth of the EU member states. According to the results of 2014 elections, eight political groups and independent MEPs work in the European Parliament. Party groups are key actors in the EP political process. Thus, the key indicator used when analysing the balance of political forces in the European Parliament is the proportion of seats held by each group rather than by each Europarty separately (table 2).

Party groups develop a consolidated position, which is not binding during the vote, in line with the political and ideological priorities of party groups. Political groups also participate in the work of committees preparing amendments to legislative acts considered by the EP. Party groups play an important role in organising the functioning of the EP. In particular, a conference of group presidents appoints members of committees, formulates agendas for parliamentary sessions, etc. Political groups can also create joint workgroups for informal exchange of opinions between different political forces in the European Parliament [1].

Table 1

A comparison of Europarties by representation in EU governing bodies, funding, and political and ideological platform

Europarty	Number of EP members	Number of EC members	Number of European Council members (including D. Tusk J.-C. Juncker)	EU funding (2015), m euro [16]	Political and ideological platform ⁴
European People's Party (EPP)	215	14	9	8.09	Christian democracy Conservatism
Party of European Socialists (PES)	190	8	8	6.54	Social democracy
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	70	5	7	2.09	Liberalism
The Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR)	50	1	2	1.95	Conservatism Economic Liberalism Euroscepticism
European Green Party (EGP)	48	0	0	1.7	Green
Party of the European Left (PEL)	22	0	1	1.63	Democratic socialism Communism
Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe (ADDE)	27	0	0	1.24	Euroscepticism Right-wing populism National conservatism
Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF)	33	0	0	1.17	Nationalism Right-wing populism
European Free Alliance (EFA)	12	0	0	0.71	Regionalism Interests of minorities
European Democratic Party (EDP)	11	0	0	0.65	Centrism
European Alliance for Freedom (EAF)	5	0	0	0.52	Euroscepticism Right-wing populism Nationalism
European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)	6	0	0	0.46	Christian right-wing Social conservatism
Europeans United for Democracy (EUD)	2	0	0	0.39	Euroscepticism
Alliance of European National Movements (AENM)	3	0	0	0.35	Euroscepticism

⁴ The ideological comparison of Europarties is based on the approach applied in the 'Parties and Elections in Europe' research project using the cleavage model proposed by Lipset and Rokkan [15].

Political groups and Europarties in the European Parliament according to the 2014 election²

Political groups	Constituent Europarties ³	Political platform ⁴ [15]	Number of seats in the EP	% of seats in the EP
European People's Party	European People's Party	Christian democracy Conservatism Centrism	216	28.8
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	Party of European Socialists	Centre-left Social democracy Socialism	190	25.33
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, European Democratic Party	Centrism Liberalism	70	9.33
The Greens — European Free Alliance	European Green Party, European Free Alliance	Centre-left Regionalism Green	50	6.67
European Conservatives and Reformists	Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists, European Christian Political Movement	Centre-right Eurocepticism Conservatism Liberal conservatism Social conservatism Anti-Federalism Economic liberalism	75	10

² The numbers quoted in the table are based on the official statistics available at the EP official website (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu>).

³ Some EP political groups include national parties and non-Inscrīts alongside Europarties.

⁴ The classification of ideological platforms of political groups is based on the approach applied in the 'Parties and Elections in Europe' research project using the cleavage model proposed by Lipset and Rokkan [15].

End of table 2

Political groups	Constituent Europarties ⁵	Political platform ⁶ [15]	Number of seats in the EP	% of seats in the EP
European United Left — Nordic Green Left	Party of the European Left, Nordic Green Left Alliance	Left Communism Democratic socialism	51	6.8
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy	Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe	Right-wing Eurocepticism National conservatism Right-wing populism	45	6
Europe of Nations and Freedom	European Alliance for Freedom, Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom	Eurocepticism National conservatism Right-wing populism	38	5.07
Non-Inscrīts	Alliance of European National Movements	Eurocepticism	15	2

⁵ Some EP political groups include national parties and non-Inscrīts alongside Europarties.

⁶ The classification of ideological platforms of political groups is based on the approach applied in the 'Parties and Elections in Europe' research project using the cleavage model proposed by Lipset and Rokkan [15].

⁷ Non-attached MEPs who do not sit in any recognised EP groups. Most of them represent far-right and far-left movements and parties criticising European integration.

European-level (supranational) party system

The ‘two-tier’ structure of European-level party organisations stirred heated debates among researchers focusing on the particularities of the EU party system¹. The problem is that Europarties do not openly compete with each other during EP elections. Some researchers stress the lack of a cohesive system of European-level party representation due to the limits to citizens’ participation in EP elections imposed by national borders [17]. Voters elect national rather than European-level parties, although the latter run massive European campaigns. Moreover, Europarties compete with each other through the mediation of national parties for seats in the European Parliament, which affects the balance of forces after the formation of political groups. Creating political groups, Europarties compete in the European Parliament for the influence on Union-level decision-making [24].

The classical definition of the party system formulated by M. Duverge² suggests the following criteria for identifying an aggregate of parties as a party system — presence of a party structure, relative stability of connections between party organisations, and dynamic interactions between them (competition). A combination of these characteristics grants ‘access’ to representing interests of voters in the Parliament, which participates in EU governance.

The European-level party system meets these criteria, although it is not completely identical to a typical national party system. Europarties interact in the European Parliament, where they form political groups, which influence the legislative process in the EU and the operation of the EU governing bodies and compete with the other Europarties and political groups. Therefore, there is a supranational party system, within which Europarties interact and compete at the level of the European Parliament. At the same time, communication with voters is conducted through the constituent national parties, whereas Europarties act as mediators in the course of political group formation (national parties — European parties — political groups).

Thus, the EU party system has both similarities to, and difference from, national party systems. However, using this term in the context of the EU is justified, since Europarties compete with each other and their interaction produces a ‘system effect’, i. e. legitimises the functioning of the European Parliament.

The EU party system consisting of 15 Europarties and including permanent members — national parties of EU member states — can be considered as a multi-party system. This corresponds to Duverger’s law stating that proportional representation tends to favour multipartism, which is observed at the levels of both national party system and the EU [2].

¹ This article treats the term ‘European-level party system’ as synonym for the ‘EU party system’.

² ‘In every country, over a relatively long period of time, there is a certain stability in the number of parties, their internal structures, their ideologies, even their respective sizes, alliances, and types of opposition’ [2, p. 31].

An important feature is that no political force has an absolute parliamentary majority in the European Parliament (above 50% of votes). Primarily, this is a result of national party systems translated to European level. As mentioned above, the total number of Europarties (both parliamentary and those without representation in the EP) is fifteen. Such diversity is created by the pluralism of political programmes and agendas of national parties and the erosion of class structure in European societies. As a result, no political platform promoted by Europarties can win a majority of European votes.

It is also important to consider another feature of European parties. Some less influential national parties with small representation in national parliaments can have large political representation in the European Parliament, which gives them an opportunity to influence European political processes [9]. For instance, in the 2014 EP elections, Marine Le Pen's National Front won in France, the Danish People's Party in Denmark, the UK Independence Party in the UK, etc. Of course, the impressive performance of these parties is accounted for by growing Euroscepticism in the EU amid the financial crisis and migration problems. However, winning EP elections does not mean a victory at the national level [23]. A statistical analysis of voters' behaviour in EP elections fits in the 'second-order election' pattern. This means that voters view elections to the EP as an interim confidence referendum and a chance to voice protest against the ruling national parties and the policies of supranational institutions of the EU [16]. In general, the difference between the results of leading national parties in national and EP elections is approximately 40%.

The impressive results of oppositional parties in European-level elections are accounted for by the particularities of the EU election system, namely, its two-tier structure [12]. Its supranational components include the following common rules. MEPs are directly elected in each EU member state based on the proportionality principle. The election threshold in member states is 5% of the total vote. These conditions create a favourable situation for less influential parties of second and third rank to secure representation in the European Parliament.

The national level is regulated by the laws of EU member states. Each state determines the number of constituencies. An up to 5% election threshold is set by each member state (in some countries, the threshold does not apply). In all countries, candidates are nominated by political parties (national parties of member states put up candidates and hold election campaigns [14]). However, some countries nominate independent MPs (for instance, Poland and Ireland). In different countries, seats are distributed using disparate methods, including the highest averages method, the Hare quota, the Droop quota, the Webster/Sainte-Laguë method, and others. Moreover, voting age also ranges from 18 to 25 years [8].

Thus, the election system combining national and supranational elements accounts for the particularities of the structure and functioning of the supranational party system. Moreover, it is closely connected with the two-tier system of the latter and a significant number of parties at European level.

Conclusions

A combination of national and European institutions creates a complex multi-tier system of political relations in the European Parliament and the EU in general. Organisational structures and stable competitive interaction between Europarties in the European Parliament support the hypothesis about the development of a supranational party system in the EU.

The EU is an intergovernmental association, which has developed a complex system of supranational political institutions. These institutions are coordinated with and sometimes opposed to the political bodies of EU member states. These factors explain the key features of the functioning of the EP and the EU party system — the two-tier structure of Europarties and the EU party and election system combining national and supranational components. There are a number of secondary characteristics — the intermediary function of Europarties bringing together national parties and parliamentary political groups, the absence of a parliamentary majority in the EP, the impressive performance of oppositional national parties in European elections accounted for by typical models of voters' behaviour, etc.

A comparative analysis shows that the influence of Europarties is distributed unevenly in the European Parliament. Four centrist parties account for the majority of EP seats and have the largest representation in EU governing bodies. As a result, the leading parties have significant administrative resources and they are closely connected with supranational EU structures. In their turn, small Europarties have little administrative impact on the EU governing bodies and they often represent the extremes of the political spectrum, sometimes espousing Euroscepticism.

Despite their gradual structuring and ideological grouping, Europarties still depend on political groups in the legislative process and national parties in the election process. Today, Europarties fulfil a number of important political and integration functions. However, they are not major drivers behind European integration and they are unlikely to become ones in the near future due to the lack of institutional tools of direct influence and the absence of direct communication with voters.

One of the ways to strengthen the role of Europarties could be creating a European constituency distributing a certain proportion of EP seats (10% is often proposed) among Europarties. Direct participation in elections within the European constituency would bring European institutions closer to EU citizens. Voters would have an opportunity to vote for candidates from other countries, which would strengthen the institution of European citizenship and contribute to the European agenda in the European Parliament, which still serves as a platform to many MEPs to promote national rather than European interests.

At the same time, this reform would be associated with significant risks — establishing a European constituency would open up additional political opportunities for large European parties at the expense of small national par-

ties. Large, well-known Europarties will enjoy significant support within such constituency thus reducing the actual spectrum of voters from EU member states represented in the European Parliament.

These characteristics suggest that the political transformation of the EU from an intergovernmental association to a (con)federation has not completed yet. A complex system of institutions and coordination of interests in the framework of the European Parliament and the EU decelerates and decentralises the decision-making process. This results in disagreements between the European institutions and the national governments of EU member states. The latter are associated with concentrated authority and clearly formulated national interests, which encourages them to influence European-level decision-making so that it meets the national interests. These complications can be overcome through either developing European integration (for instance, establishing a European constituency) or partially 'liberating' national governments from supranational EU structures.

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