Review Commentary

Do Transnational Party Federations Matter? (… and Why Should We Care?)

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Abstract

Compared to national political parties, transnational party federations (often known as Europarties) play little role in the European Union (EU). They have no government-making power, and national party politics continue to dominate European Parliament elections. The literature therefore focuses primarily on national political parties operating within the EU framework and on supranational party groups in the European Parliament. In contrast, this review article examines what transnational party federations are and what they do within the context of EU governance, in addition to and reconsidering them in light of recent developments in the EU. By analysing party politics at the transnational level, this article bridges the gap in the literature between research that focuses on the national level and research that focuses on the supranational level. The key conclusion is that transnational party federations do matter, but in a manner different from that of national political parties and supranational party groups. Because transnational party federations offer partisan linkages between different EU institutions, they influence politics and policy-making, in addition to contributing to the increasing politicisation of the EU polity.

IN THEIR ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE 'NEW EUROPE' (*I.E.* EUROPE IN the 21st century), Luther and Müller-Rommel (2002a) list 'European integration' as one of six changes at the level of the political system that challenge the traditional behaviour of national political parties. Moreover, the emergence of the political Europe (arguably from as early as the first direct European Parliamentary elections in 1979, but certainly since the time leading up to the Treaty of Maastricht) raised party politics into the supranational level. This "constitutes a fundamental change to the operational context of political parties. Such changes imply not only political challenges for parties and the political systems in which they operate, but also analytical challenges for empirical political science" (Luther and Müller-Rommel 2002a: 5). The study of party politics, however, has long been 'caught' in a state-centric paradigm (Luther and Müller-Rommel 2002a: 5; Deschouwer 2006: 292; Ladrech 2002). Not surprisingly, political parties have been studied predominantly within the framework of the nation-state.

Scholars of party politics have gradually acknowledged the consequences of European integration for the operational context of political parties, particularly at the national level (see *e.g.* Carter *et al.* 2007: 1-2). The role of European integration is seen as one of the main

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dimensions of recent change within Western European politics. In particular, domestic party politics can no longer be isolated from the European integration process (Hix and Goetz 2000: 3). In turn, scholars studying the European Union have increasingly focussed on party politics, especially within the Europeanisation research agenda (for an overview, see Mair 2006; Poguntke *et al.* 2007b). Because Europeanisation was initially defined as the impact of the European integration process on the politics and the policies of nation-states, political parties (even those at the national level) have remained under-researched for a long time. Ladrech (2002) developed a framework for analysing the Europeanisation of political parties, but it has yet to be applied systematically to particular cases, with the exception of the Spanish *Partido Popular* (Van Hecke 2009).

Poguntke and colleagues (2007a; 2007b) recently published the first major study involving a comparative analysis of the impact of Europeanisation. This study conceptualises Europeanisation as "intra-organizational change in national political parties that is induced by the ongoing process of European integration" (Carter *et al.* 2007: 5). The project is primarily directed towards national political parties, as it focuses on organisation (both formal and informal) and its consequences for the internal balance of political parties. At the same time, it does "not lose sight of the fact that Europeanization is a two-way process and that various 'feedback loops' between the domestic and the supranational level exist" (Carter *et al.* 2007: 5). Despite the introductory claims, the empirical evidence of the study is rather limited, if not non-existent (see the various chapters in Poguntke *et al.* 2007a). For example, the authors provide little information about the relationships between national political parties and transnational party federations. The results of the study do not necessarily prove the minor status of transnational party federations as such. They only prove the minor status of transnational party federations with regard to their impact on the organisation of national parties and the distribution of power within them.

In contrast, Hix *et al.* (2007) witness the development of a supranational party system. Their research focuses primarily on supranational party groups in the European Parliament, and it is based on an extensive analysis of roll-call votes in the plenary sessions that have been held in Strasbourg and Brussels since the first direct elections in 1979. Based on evidence regarding the cohesiveness of parliamentary groups and the dominance of the socio-economic left-right divide in the Parliament's voting behaviour, Hix *et al.* define the EU as a system of 'democratic politics'. To be sure, they refer to factors that the EU system still lacks, but which are necessary before it can become a 'complete' democratic system, and they make concrete proposals for remediation (Hix 2008). It should be noted, however, that this relatively general conclusion is drawn from empirical evidence about the European Parliament and its supranational party groups, leaving aside other EU institutions and transnational party federations.

In light of the points mentioned above, this article examines what transnational party federations are and what they do within the context of EU governance, reconsidering them in light of recent developments in the EU. Party politics at the EU level cannot be fully analysed in research that limits its focus to national political parties or supranational party groups. Transnational party federations should also be taken into account, regardless of the often normative question of their relative importance in comparison with national political parties and supranational party groups. By examining party politics at the transnational level, this article bridges the gap in the literature between studies that focus on the national level and those that focus on the supranational level. The analysis is based primarily on secondary literature instead of on empirical research. The objective of this article is therefore to review the literature that addresses the transnational level. It also covers a number of recent developments in the EU that are of primary importance to transnational party federations. The article thus begins by discussing issues regarding the definition and current status of transnational party federations. This discussion is followed by a review of the state of the art

in research about party politics at the transnational level. The third and central section considers the extent to which transnational party federations matter, as well as the ways in which they matter. The article concludes by organising arguments concerning whether or not 'transnational party politics' should be considered when studying EU politics and policy-making.

What are 'transnational party federations', and why do they exist?

Since their inception more than 30 years ago, political parties operating primarily at the European level have been assigned a number of different labels, each with a specific connotation. For example, some scholars refer (albeit implicitly) to political parties according to the developmental stage in which they occur (see *e.g.* Hix and Lord 1997). The term 'Europarties' has recently become popular (see *e.g.* Bardi 2006; Ladrech 2006). This term does indeed sound better than 'transnational parties' (or similar terms) and, more importantly, it incorporates 'Europe'. Contemporary Europe is obviously the only existing arena in which those parties operate. From a theoretical point of view, however, this is not necessarily the case, and it is not clear how likely this exclusivity is to continue. More generally, in order to maintain their universality, definitions should avoid non-generic wordings (regardless of whether they refer to one or multiple entities). In addition, national parties often use the term 'Europarties' to highlight their pro-European character (*e.g.* during election campaigns and in manifestos). Others have even chosen to include 'Europe' or 'European' as the unique adjective in their names. For example, the German CDU refers to itself as the *Europapartei*; other examples include the Dutch *Europese Partij* and the Cypriote *Ευρωπαϊκό Κόμμα*, which were active in the 1999 and 2005 European Parliament elections, respectively. All of these names translate into 'European Party'.

In this paper, the term 'transnational party federation' is used, as opposed to 'national political parties' and 'supranational party groups'. First, the term emphasises the fact that these parties are federations (*i.e.* they consist of various national political parties). They are at a higher level than national political parties are, but they are not (yet) supranational, as their components are not fully integrated into a single organisation. The party groups within the European Parliament provide an example of such 'supranationalisation'. National delegations composed of several Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) form single groups. From the moment they are composed, party groups operate independent of national political parties. In our definition, the fact that supranational party groups are more developed than transnational party federations does not imply a normative bias. Second, the adjective 'transnational' is essential, as it refers to the transnational level (*i.e.* the level between the national and the supranational levels), for which a separate and distinct party organisation has been established. 'Transnational party politics' therefore refers to the level at which the national (or intergovernmental) and the EU (or supranational) spheres overlap. In other words, they are 'multi-level' parties (Deschouwer 2006). It should be noted, however, that Deschouwer refers to 'political parties in multi-level systems parties' instead of 'multi-level parties', thus placing particular emphasis on the institutional context that shapes party politics. Nonetheless, the partisan affiliation of politicians acting on these three levels is defined by their membership in national political parties. This does not mean, however, that the organisations in which they practice politics are also national or dominated by national interest. The transnational level reflects the dual character of the EU, being intergovernmental and supranational at the same time. Transnational party federations are involved with intergovernmental institutions (*e.g.* the Council of Ministers and the European Council), as well as supranational institutions (*e.g.* the European Parliament) (see Table 1). More generally, the fact that they operate in both the institutional circuits of the EU is a unique characteristic of transnational parties (Bardi 2002: 294). Bardi even adds that, in

general, "intergovernmentalism has prevailed over supranationalism", and that "[t]his is also true of [national and transnational] political parties" (2002: 294).

Table 1: Levels and their corresponding party organisations and EU institutions

Level	Party organisation	EU institutions
National	National political parties	National governments and parliaments
Transnational	Transnational party federations	Council of Ministers, European Council
Supranational	Supranational party groups	European Commission, European Parliament

Transnational party federations are also collective units, to a much greater extent than national political parties and supranational party groups are. More precisely, they are collective in a different way. National political parties are sometimes analysed as non-unitary actors, as is the case when addressing intra-party organisations, factions, tendencies or similar topics. This is equally true of transnational party federations, although they are also non-unitary in the sense that they are composed of national political parties. Despite the fact that the statutes of transnational party federations do contain provisions that extend membership to individuals, membership is primarily restricted to national political parties. As a result, the nature of variations between transnational parties in terms of membership numbers differs from the nature of similar variations in national political parties. Membership variations among transnational parties are also related to the size of each member (small or large member parties); this element is completely absent from the membership composition of national political parties. In a national (or local/regional) party, all members are equal, although size (quantity) is accompanied by weight (influence). In theory, large member parties are independent of each other; in practice, they are often strong or influential in terms of policy-making. Policy distance (including intra-policy distance) is also a major factor. For example, a large member party could be weak if it is located far from the ideological centre of its transnational party federation. On the whole, intra-policy distances reflect the degree of cohesiveness within intra-transnational parties. This is important in a number of situations, as when a transnational party federation drafts an electoral manifesto that is intended to be binding for its member parties.

Transnational party federations are much more elite-driven than are national political parties. It is the leadership that runs the party, and there is little participation from partisans. Unlike national political parties, the electorate, the membership, the rank-and-file and other actors cannot compete with the leadership, as these party components do not exist at the transnational level. Unlike national political parties, transnational parties have almost no direct links with society, except for the slowly growing number of actors in European civil society. Transnational parties are therefore not embedded in society. Similar to national political parties, transnational party federations have organised themselves around *familles spirituelles,* or party families (von Beyme 1985). Not all of these families, however, have been present from the early days of transnational party federations. Since 2004, transnational party federations have had a legal status and have benefited from direct financing from the European Parliament budget.[1] According to the law, no less than ten

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[1] Regulation (EC) No. 2004/2003 of the European Parliament and the Council of 4 November 2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, Official Journal of the European Union, L297/1-4, 15 November 2003. The regulation and its 2007 amendment use the term 'political parties at European level'.

organisations are now recognised as 'political parties at European level' and consequently receive EU party finances (see Table 2).

Table 2: 'Political parties at European level', their corresponding party groups in the European Parliament and political families[2]

Political party at European level	Official European Parliament group name	Political family
European People's Party	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	Christian Democrats / Conservatives
Party of European Socialists	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	Socialists / Social Democrats
European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party	Group of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	Liberals / Centrists
European Democratic Party		
European Green Party	Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance	Greens
European Free Alliance		Leftist Regionalists
Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists	European Conservatives and Reformists Group	Conservatives / Eurosceptics
Party of the European Left	Confederal Group of the European Left - Nordic Green Left	Non-socialist Left
EUDemocrats	Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group	Eurosceptics
European Christian Political Movement	*no corresponding group*	Christian-social

Sources: data retrieved from
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/grants/grant_amounts_parties.pdf and
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/groups/default_en.htm in July 2010

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[2] As the Table shows, the relations between 'political parties at European level' and EP party groups is not always one-to-one. Most relations are stable since 2004, the start of the direct funding. 'Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists' and 'European Christian Political Movement' are the most recent 'political parties at European level'. In 2010, they received grants for the first time. The Eurosceptic 'Alliance for Europe of the Nations' and the 'Alliance of Independent Democrats in Europe' received grants until 2009.

In practice, however, scholars agree that only three or four of these organisations should be called 'transnational party federations': the European People's Party (EPP), which was founded as a federation in 1976; the Confederation of Socialist Parties, which was founded in 1974 and transformed into the Party of European Socialists (PES) in 1992; the Federation of European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Parties, which was founded in 1976 and was renamed the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) in 1993; and the European Federation of Green Parties (EFGP), which was established in 1993 and changed its name to the European Green Party in the period leading up to the 2004 European Parliament elections. The integration of these federations was clearly caused by events that stimulated European integration: the direct elections of the European Parliament in 1979, the introduction of the 'party article' in the Treaty of Maastricht and the 2004 regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding.

In 2008, several amendments to the original regulation were the result of co-decision (first reading agreement).[3] In addition to introducing more flexibility regarding how party funds can be spent, two significant modifications are worth mentioning. First, 'European political foundations' (modelled after the German *Stiftungen*) are allowed to be established by and linked to the existing 'political parties at European level'. Second, these parties are permitted to use their financial means during campaigns for the elections of the European Parliament. These amendments have been in force since 2008, and the first elections held under these new rules were those of June 2009. Extensions of the legal competences of transnational party federations are often justified with reference to their role in 'enhancing political debate at EU level'.[4] The immediate impact of this new regulation was relatively weak, due to a number of factors, including the fact that the rules under which the European Parliament elections were held had not been changed. Nonetheless, the ambiguous character of the regulation is clear: "these [financial] appropriations shall not be used for the direct or indirect funding of national political parties or candidates".[5] If the contributions of transnational party federations to the election campaigns are thus limited to bringing their manifestos into view, little will change. The direction of any profound changes in response to this new regulation remains to be seen, however, as does the extent to which they will serve to strengthen transnational party federations.

What do we know about transnational political parties?

Transnational party federations did not fall out of the blue. The three most prominent federations (EPP, PES and ELDR) were founded in the mid-1970s. Their origins are directly linked to the period leading up to the first elections of the European Parliament by universal suffrage, which had originally been planned for 1978, but did not actually take place until June 1979. Using Duverger's (1951) terms, transnational party federations were "internally created" in this regard, in contrast to "externally created" parties, whose origins are outside existing political institutions (Duverger 1951). Without a doubt, the party groups that had already existed since the 1950s took the lead in creating party organisations (see *e.g.* Van Hecke 2006). Duverger's terms can also be used to define transnational party federations as "indirect parties", as they are composed of other institutions or organisations, which control the membership.

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[3] Regulation (EC) No. 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2007 amending Regulation (EC) No. 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, Official Journal of the European Union, L343/5-8, 27 December 2007.

[4] European Parliament Press Release, 'Sounder funding arrangements for European political parties', 8 November 2007. Available at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/default_en.htm, accessed on 8 November 2007.

[5] Regulation (EC) No. 1524/2007, Article 8, Paragraph 3.

Compared to most national political parties, transnational party federations are very weak in terms of representation, here defined as the aggregation and articulation of voters' interests (Mair 2009). Representation is weakened by the specific character of the European Parliament elections. In their well-known article, Reif and Schmitt (1980) define European Parliament elections as "second-order national elections". In short, the first European elections were 'national' because candidate selection, issues, campaigns and other aspects were national, not European. They were considered 'second-order', as they had little or no direct effect on the parties that were in government at the national level, as is the case with local elections. The concept of 'second-order national elections' was later refined, particularly with regard to the timing of European elections –the electoral cycle (Reif, 1984). Elections taking place in the middle of a legislative term generate a '*vote sanction'* for government parties prior to first-order national elections. Despite several treaty reforms, this situation remains unchanged. Because European Parliament elections are second-order national elections, transnational party federations (and even European Parliament groups) are *a posteriori* party organisations. They are always late, as national parties wield power in a number of ways, including the control they exercise over the selection of candidates and the party group MEPs join, once they are elected.

In addition to observing that the activities of transnational party federations are restricted to second-order elections, scholars have distinguished different phases in the institutionalisation of these federations. With reference to Panebianco (1988), it is possible to distinguish two dimensions of institutionalisation. First, institutionalisation depends on the degree of autonomy that an organisation has in relation to its environment. In this sense, transnational party federations are weak, as they must respond and adapt to an environment that they are not able to control. Second, institutionalisation relates to the degree of 'system-ness' (*i.e.* the interdependence among sub-groups that is made possible by the centre's control of resources). Given the primary importance of national political parties among its constituent elements, transnational party federations are not institutionalised in this way either. This is not surprising, as the two dimensions are empirically linked: an organisation with a low degree of system-ness will find it hard to become autonomous with respect to its environment.

There is consensus among scholars about the number and main features of the various phases of development, as well as on the decisive role of the environment in explaining party change (Hix and Lord 1997; Kreppel 2002; Hix *et al.* 2007; Bardi 2006; Ladrech 2006). The foundation of the three most prominent transnational party federations in the mid-1970s is considered the first developmental stage. The second stage coincides with the drafting, ratification and implementation of the Single European Act. In this period, transnational party federations attempted to become "network facilitators" (Ladrech 2006), supporting European integration (according to their own vision). In the third stage, the role of transnational party federations was constitutionalised, while the increasing competences of the European Parliament, new ways of decision-making and enlargement brought about organisational change. The fourth stage (and the last, to date) coincides with the enlargements of 2004 and 2007, as well as the implementation of the 2003 and 2007 regulations. In each of these developmental stages, integration (institutional incentives) and enlargement (broadly understood as increase in terms of numbers) has been of paramount importance (Hix *et al.* 2007). One result has been the growing emancipation of transnational party federations with regard to their European Parliament groups. The increasing institutionalisation, however, is more analogous to climbing a mountain than it is to climbing a ladder. Bardi (2006) correctly adds that every European election generates some disruptive effects. Although Bardi's observation refers primarily to the European Parliament groups, transnational party federations are also affected by this discontinuity, albeit to a lesser degree. This could also be seen as a reminder that weak institutionalised organisations have a higher chance of regression than strong ones do.

Despite their being caught in second-order elections, and despite the above-mentioned reservations regarding their institutionalisation, transnational party federations have demonstrated a remarkable adaptability to alter their organisations and, much more profoundly, to incorporate a large and diverse number of new members, from both new and old member states. As a result, they have become more complex in terms of size, strength and policy distance. For example, in the European Parliament, the three or four largest party groups (the core of the European party system) have left other multi-party groups largely behind in terms of numbers (Bardi 2002: 309-310). By changing the rules of procedure of the Parliament, they have more or less expelled small groups from power. And they have made it impossible for single-party groups to be recognised as official European Parliament groups. These favourable circumstances (or, more precisely, the circumstances from which transnational party federations have benefited) are due in part to such developments as the introduction of co-decision or changes in the internal rules of the European Parliament that have disadvantageous effects for small party groups. Transnational party federations have been both the object and the subject of change. As "rational, purposive organisations, they obviously have considerable incentives to mould the institutional opportunity structure in their favour", similar to national political parties (Luther and Müller-Rommel 2002b: 340).

The first scholar to refer to political parties at European level, Haas (1958) made the often-cited observation that "the competing activities of permanently organised interest groups and of political parties are singled out as the significant carriers of values and ideologies whose opposition, identity or convergence determines the success or failure of a transnational ideology" (1958: 5). Even more importantly, Haas sees the study of transnational party development as an important perspective that can be used to analyse the development of the EU as a political system (Bardi 2002: 294). In the aftermath of the first direct elections of the European Parliament in 1979, a number of scholars paid attention to EU-level party politics. The two main works of that period are by Pridham and Pridham (1981) and by Niedermayer (1983). The scholarly enthusiasm did not last very long, and research on European integration was dominated by authors in the field of international relations, who had little or no interest in the matter. Research on transnational party federations later moved closer to the mainstream of EU studies with the revival of the EU in the late 1980s and the introduction of the field of comparative politics (Hix 1994).

Ever since, the study of transnational party politics has been part of a tradition within the field of comparative politics that sees the EU as a developing political system, the components of which are analogous to nation-states (Bardi 2002: 294). This comparison has both advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is that this analogy is 'caught' within the state-centric paradigm, making national political parties the dominant unit of comparison. Transnational party federations were consequently considered weak in such areas as organisation, policy formulation, interest representation, media access and staff. The analogy is also advantageous, however, as it allows the study of transnational party politics to benefit from numerous insights and findings about national political parties that have developed within the field of comparative politics. For example, the application of the Comparative Manifestos Project research (Budge *et al*. 2001; Volkens *et al.* 2006) to the European Parliament elections (including the manifestos of transnational party federations) led to the creation of the Euromanifestos Project.[6] 'Transnational' manifestos are the object of research similar to first-order national manifestos (see *e.g.* Duncan and Van Hecke 2008).

Within the comparative-political approach, both Bardi (2002) and Mair (2006) have distinguished different clusters ('waves' or 'concerns', respectively) in research on transnational party politics. Their classifications begin with a focus on the origins and development of transnational party politics, which inevitably raises the question of whether

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[6] See http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/manifestos (accessed on 17 December 2007).

there is a tendency towards the emergence or establishment of genuine European, supranational political parties. According to Bardi, descriptive research has replaced the speculative studies of the early days. In the next wave, the European Parliament party system was scrutinised in the attempt to analyse and explain its shape and dynamics. This was accomplished by examining roll-call votes (which were used to assess the cohesiveness of EP party groups) and by identifying patterns of division and alignment along which voting behaviour was organised. Research based on roll-call votes has been criticised, however, from a methodological point of view (see *e.g.* Thiem 2006). Without a doubt, this branch has a much stronger empirical base, but is capable of providing only *a posteriori* explanations (Bardi 2002). Furthermore, within the broader framework of the Europeanisation approach, 'Europe' has been investigated with regard to national political parties (see *e.g.* Poguntke *et al.* 2007). Although they are much more issue-driven, recent studies discussing the legal status and direct EU financing of transnational party federations could be added to this list (Johansson and Raunio 2005; Lightfoot 2006).

One element that is missing in both practice and these classifications involves the question of whether transnational party politics matter, primarily in terms of policy. The attempt to answer this question is an important step in designing a more complete research agenda (Luther and Müller-Rommel 2002b: 343). The EU is less a polity than it is a wide, relatively effective and well-developed policy-making arena. As is the case with research on national political parties, a focus on policy impact is indispensable in the effort to obtain a complete picture of transnational party politics. In other words, regardless of issues involving the status of transnational party federations, it is important to raise the question of whether they have any impact. Broadening the research agenda in this way might contribute to the development of 'coherently theory-driven empirical research', particularly given that theories on such topics as institutions, decision-making and policy formulation are at the centre of EU research. Such a development would also be a step in the direction of more detailed empirical research on transnational party politics.

Do transnational party federations matter?

To systematise the impact of transnational party federations on EU politics, we use the well-known model of 'policy', 'office' and 'votes', introduced by Müller and Strøm (1999). The question of whether and to what extent transnational party federations matter within the EU should therefore be defined as partisan influence in terms of policy, office and votes in the main EU institutions. In general terms, Müller and Strøm (1999) distinguish three goals pursued by political parties: to influence policy, to occupy certain positions (office) and to gain as many votes as possible. The key question involves the ways in which parties manage to realise these three goals at the same time, as well as the extent to which they are able to do so. A type of trade-off exists between the three; parties normally 'make hard decisions' concerning which goals are to have precedence. They develop different strategies according to these priorities. The model of policy, office and votes has been very successful, primarily as a way of classifying political parties according to strategy (in addition to organisation and ideology). At the transnational level, however, the model has yet to be applied. Transnational party federations have come into play because "the arena in which Western European political parties pursue votes, office and policy is no longer confined to the national level" (Luther and Müller-Rommel 2002b: 341).

European Parliament

Research on partisan influence in the European Parliament is well-established (Raunio 2006), and the idea that party politics play a role within the assembly (which currently counts

736 members) is widely accepted.[7] Party politics are much more supranational in the European Parliament than they are in other bodies (*e.g.* the Council of Ministers), as the decision-making process in the European Parliament is largely remote and insulated from domestic political pressures. This subsequently facilitates inter-party cooperation and group institutionalisation (Bardi 2002: 319). The cohesiveness of these party groups has been measured through attempts to probe the attitudes held by MEPs, the analysis of roll-call votes or a combination of these approaches. In addition, the party system emerging within the European Parliament is organised along the classic left-right divide, as well as the divide between *pro* and *contra* European integration. The overall conclusion of this branch of research is that parties matter, as politics is made along ideological rather than territorial lines (to paraphrase Hix *et al.,* 2007). This applies to policy (*i.e.* the areas in which the European Parliament is competent) and office (*i.e.* the investiture of the President of the European Commission, the college as a whole and its censure). Influence in terms of votes is difficult, if not impossible, given the second-order character of the European Parliament elections.

Transnational party federations play a very limited role in this context. At this level, it is not the federations, but the supranational groups that try to be as influential as possible in terms of policy. Unlike at the national level, the groups in the European Parliament operate autonomously. "Democratic politics" (Hix *et al.*, 2007) is therefore limited to intra-parliamentary organisations. The same applies to office within the European Parliament. For example, party federations have almost no say in the appointment of group chairs. Decisions are often made among large delegations negotiating on behalf of their national political parties. In other words, appointments are made by the most important party headquarters within each political family. For example, when the EPP-ED Chairman Hans-Gert Pöttering was elected president of the European Parliament in 2007, the decision about his successor was made jointly by the German Chancellor and CDU President Angela Merkel and the French President and UMP leader Nicolas Sarkozy. With regard to external office, transnational party federations do matter. Appointment decisions that involve more than one institution are much more difficult to make. Transnational party federations link these various levels and institutions. They provide platforms for which there are no substitutes within the EU. Because no transnational party federation has an absolute majority, negotiations take place between the top representatives of the most important political families, in many cases, the EPP and the PES.

Despite the fact that the European Parliament is the only directly elected EU institution, transnational party federations do not have an impact on the 'vote'. Given the second-order national character of the elections, transnational party federations are not involved in selecting candidates, determining campaign strategies or similar processes. Transnational party federations do organise electoral congresses and meetings; they also draft manifestos, although the status of these documents is not the same in every political family. These activities and documents, however, do not seem to influence the electoral processes. Their relevance is limited to the policy agenda of the supranational party groups in the newly elected Parliament. Whether the implementation of the aforementioned 2007 amendments to the regulations on 'political parties at EU level' will produce any significant changes remains to be seen. In general, little research has been conducted across time and across political families concerning the relationship between transnational party federations and supranational groups in the European Parliament.

European Commission

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[7] Number of seats since the 2009 European Parliament elections when the Treaty of Nice was still into force.

Transnational party federations currently have only one channel at their disposal with which to influence the European Commission: 'office'. The appointment of the president and the college as a whole, as well as censure, are formal competences of the European Parliament. Because these tasks require trans-institutional coordination, however, it is the European Council that proposes the president to the Parliament, thus shifting negotiations from the supranational party groups to the transnational party federations. Despite their focus on supranational party groups, some authors (*e.g.* Hix *et al.* 2007) have observed the emergence of 'government-opposition politics'. The various cases in which the Parliament has 'opposed' the Commission (*e.g.* from the resignation of Santer over the appointment of Barroso to the rejection of Bulgarian candidate commissioner Rumiana Jeleva) have attracted considerable public and scholarly attention. The conclusion is thus not surprising. Commissioner appointments have been determined by party politics ever since the Commission was established in 1958 (Wonka 2004). Transnational party federations, however, play no role in these appointments; the appointments are decided by national governments. The political colour of these governments simply matters. This might change with the reduction in the number of commissioners, foreseen in the Treaty of Lisbon from 2014 onwards. As with the presidency of the European Commission, the geography, size and political family of the various countries will matter in these appointments, in addition to nationality. In this way, the Lisbon Treaty might strengthen the role of transnational party federations, as it will involve all members of the Commission in the partisan negotiation process.

All questions of whether 'office' is a goal in itself or a means to strengthen 'policy' aside, the impact of the partisan appointments on the Commission's activities is unclear. Relationships between transnational party federations and 'their' commissioners have obviously become more visible over the years, but this does not necessarily mean that the work of the Commissioners has become more partisan. According to one assumption, the appointment of the President and the majority of the college causes the Commission's policies to lean more to the left or to the right. To date, however, there have been no strong claims that are based on empirical evidence.

Council of Ministers

In contrast to research on the Commission, research on the influence of transnational party federations on the proceedings of the Council of Ministers could benefit from voting records. For example, Mattila (2004) is able to analyse partisan behaviour inside the Council meetings, generating results that confirm the findings of research on the voting behaviour of MEPs: the EU is a two-dimensional space in which the left-right divide prevails over the division based on European integration. In addition to party family and the attitude towards the EU, Mattila includes the presidency of the Council and large (as opposed to small) member states as independent variables. This allows for different conclusions concerning the interplay of such variables as left-wing governments that are not as inclined to vote against the Council majority as are right-wing governments. The strong reliance on voting behaviour is a problem in this regard as well. Not all voting behaviour is self-evident; strategic voting often takes place. Timing, agenda and the rules of procedure should therefore be taken into account. Other research has shown that the introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) paradoxically resulted in more decisions being made by consensus. Through QMV, member states lose their veto power and certainty with regard to their influence. To retain as much influence as possible, member states are willing to give and take. If this behaviour is generalised, it results in consensus.

Because the Council of Ministers is composed of national government representatives, partisan influence is primarily linked to national political parties. Furthermore, even if partisan

influence can be detected, it remains unclear whether it can also be transnational. This is relatively unlikely, however, as the Council is usually occupied with technical issues, which the transnational party federations are not equipped to monitor, let alone control. The only exception might be the General Affairs and External Relations Council. For example, the EPP has only once succeeded in convening its affiliated members prior to an official Council meeting, and the outcome was not satisfying (Martens 2006: 746). Since 2009, however, the EPP has tried again to establish meetings of 'EPP ministers' prior to meetings of the Council of Ministers. After some initial success, the party has included these 'Ministerial Meetings' in its statutes, upgrading it to an official party body (EPP 2009).

European Council

Similar to their situation within the Council of Ministers, transnational party federations have no impact on the 'office' and 'vote' of the European Council. This is the sole territory of the national political parties of the Member States. Unlike the meetings of the Council of Ministers, European Council meetings have been scrutinised for transnational party politics. Given that unanimity is still the dominant rule and voting is not part of its actual procedures, data-collection is even more difficult. Decisions concerning the establishment of an Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) or nominating the President of the European Commission are the notable exceptions in which QMV applies. Partisan influence inside the European Council is therefore usually examined by analysing 'party summits'.

Party summits are meetings of national and European politicians that are held on the eve of European Council sessions. These conferences are composed of national party presidents and government leaders, members of the European Commission and the leadership of the transnational party federation and supranational party group. Unlike the sessions of the European Council, party summits are relatively informal. Various topics are discussed, including intra-organisational matters, as well as such 'high' EU political issues as institutional reform and enlargement. Their functionality consists largely of drawing connections between the national and the European level, as well as between the legislative and executive powers of the EU. Only the three largest federations organise such summits on a regular basis. Party summits vary widely according to the frequency with which they are organised, the number of prime ministers who attend and other aspects. These conferences have been studied as independent variables that explain certain outcomes of European Council meetings (see *e.g.* Johansson 1999, 2002a, 2002b; Külahci 2002; Lightfoot 2003). To date, these partisan coalitions have not been studied in any systematic or comparative way.

The idea that transnational party federations bring national and European government leaders and parliamentarians together at a common, partisan table – and that they therefore matter – is also supported by research on the Convention on the Future of Europe, often referred to as the European Convention (Van Hecke 2008). The literature on this Convention is extensive, and it does address the interplay between two levels and two sorts of institutions. One aspect that has been largely neglected, however, is that three party families (EPP, PES and ELDR) tried to assert partisan influence on the final outcome of the European Convention. To this end, they established Convention party groups, bringing the number of loyalties amongst the *Conventionels* to three (level/nationality, institution and party family). Their regular but informal meetings were clearly polity-oriented, as the overall focus was on the single issue of the institutional reform of the EU. They first tried to achieve consensus within their party groups. During the second stage, the three groups contributed to the consensus within the Convention as a whole. Transnational party federations played an important role in this endeavour, especially when compared to traditional IGCs. They clearly played a smaller role (if they played a role at all) with regard to particular policy

issues (*e.g.* the *Invocatio Dei* and economic governance), as lack of internal coherence prohibited them from making strong claims.

Should we bother investigating transnational party federations?

Given the impact of transnational party federations with regard to 'office', 'policy' and 'votes', should we really bother investigating them? This question is crucial in two ways. First and foremost, it is an *a priori* question, as studies of transnational party politics often refer to norms (normativity). Second, it is also an *a posteriori* question based on empirical evidence that has been collected (evaluation). This part of the paper presents a number of arguments, varying in type and weight without claiming to be exhaustive. These arguments relate to both questions, and they consider the relative value of conducting research on transnational party federations. The reasons why researchers should not bother with transnational party politics are listed first, followed by a discussion of the arguments in favour of conducting such research. The only criterion for inclusion is that the arguments should be rooted in particular ways of understanding (or explaining) the EU as it is today.

The first argument for not bothering with transnational party federations has already been discussed: simple comparison with national party politics immediately leads to the conclusion that at the transnational level there still is considerable room for development and its investigation is not worth the effort at this point. For example, this comparison can be made with regard to the role that political parties play as channels of interest representation (Lord 2006). In this context as well, the second-order nature of European Parliament clearly implies that transnational party federations are considerably behind national political parties in terms of interest representation. Second, the lack of empirical evidence and difficulties in data collection suggest the same conclusion, as does the overall emphasis on such side-issues as the 'election' of the President of the European Commission every five years, as opposed to the Commission in its day-to-day policy-making role. Third, the characterisation of the EU as a bureaucratic, technocratic or depoliticised organisation with decision-making procedures (*e.g.* early agreements, comitology, fast-track legislation, delegation, agency) leaves almost no room for party politics at all, much less at the transnational level. Fourth, the Europeanisation of national political parties might be so limited (see *e.g.* Poguntke *et al.* 2007) as to call into question whether transnational party federations play a role at all.

One argument in favour of researching transnational party federations is that neither proponents nor opponents question the importance of EU decision-making, either quantitatively or qualitatively (*e.g.* with regard to national legislation). Consequently, the potential of transnational party federations to influence this decision-making process makes them worth analysing. A small impact on a very important process could generate major consequences. Second, transnational party federations are the only entities to form bridges between politicians in the three main EU institutions, as mentioned before. This fact easily leads to the conclusion that this unique characteristic of transnational party federations should be investigated. Party summits, regular intergovernmental and inter-institutional conferences are particularly worth examining. Third, the Lisbon Treaty changes some important parts of the EU institutional design in a way that could strengthen transnational party politics (Kurpas *et al.* 2007; Hix 2008). Under the new provisions, the European Parliament elects the President of the Commission on a proposal made by the European Council, taking into account the European Parliament elections and after having held the appropriate consultations. As aptly stated by Kurpas *et al.* (2007: 12), "[the] new role of the EP in this procedure could be interpreted as a mere ratification of a choice already made". At the same time, however, the Treaty goes one step further by triggering transnational party federations to propose their candidates for the presidency of the Commission during the European Parliament elections campaign. Before the change, this was done after the

election. As a result, "[the] personality of the candidate could presumably become a significant element in the political debate" (2007: 13). Fourth, concrete examples of politicisation can be observed within the European Parliament (*e.g.* the debate about the services directive). One example is the presence of 'independent Commissioners' at transnational party congresses. Transnational party federations are the nexus of this politicisation process. Politicisation should therefore be examined by analysing transnational party federations. Finally, in light of Schattschneider's famous statement that "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties" (1942), transnational party federations cannot be neglected if the EU should become more democratic. Moreover, they should be strengthened as a means of resolving the 'democratic deficit'.

Certainly worth mentioning, and closely related to politicisation, is the debate between Hix (2006) and Bartolini (2006) concerning the way in which the EU should be 'cured', particularly with regard to problems involving the lack of legitimacy and democratic control. As mentioned earlier, Hix is clearly in favour of additional left-right politics. Not only is politicisation inevitable, it is also a healthy development, as it increases the legitimacy of the EU and enhances the political democratic debate. This is essential, if the EU is to become a true polity. In contrast, Bartolini argues that politicisation is the wrong medicine to heal the ailing institutional framework of the EU. He even warns that the remedy might be worse than the disease, as the EU lacks the infrastructure (*e.g.* strong European political parties, channels of partisan co-ordination) necessary to deal with politicisation. In other words, additional left-right politics would do more harm than good. What is particularly interesting about these positions is that they are not simply taken for granted; they are thoroughly developed and grounded in theories concerning the European integration process. At the same time, both consider transnational party politics to be crucial to the future development of the EU (Ricard-Nihoul 2006).

Conclusion

This article has focused on transnational party federations. Unlike national political parties and supranational groups in the European Parliament, transnational party federations are often neglected in studying party politics at EU level, even in recent research (Hix *et al.* 2007; Poguntke *et al.* 2007a; 2007b). Nonetheless, there is now widespread agreement that party politics matter at the EU level. This paradox can be resolved by including transnational party federations as partisan actors in the EU. The question is not whether they are more influential than national political parties or supranational groups in the European Parliament. In other words, the question does not concern the relative importance of or competition among partisan organisations. Instead, it involves the ways in which partisan organisations matter, and the extent to which they matter at the levels at which they operate. For transnational party federations, this is the transnational level. Although the elections fought at this level are 'second-order', this does not automatically mean that transnational party federations are 'second-order' too.

The review presented in this article clearly demonstrates the general lack of empirical evidence about the impact of transnational party federations on EU policies, politics and the polity. More research is needed. Which form should future research take? First, it should move beyond the question of existence as, theoretically speaking, the question of existence should be distinguished from the question of influence. In other words, what transnational party federations are (or are not) should not distract from what they do. Second, more insights from the field of comparative politics should be used, and its models should be further developed in order to integrate the particularities of transnational party politics into EU studies. One example might involve systematic research on partisan influence on EU public policy (see *e.g.* Schmitt, 1996) or comparisons with the US party system. Third, the

EU's peculiarities should be fully taken into account. This means that the institutional framework of the EU should be taken as it is, with no office-seeking role for transnational party federations in the Council of Ministers. In short, although the EU sets the limits, it also creates certain opportunity structures for transnational party federations. The opportunity structures of these federations should be addressed in a systematic and comparative way.

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