

# Assessing the role and significance of transnational political parties within the European Union

## ESF Exploratory Workshop – Executive Summary

### 1. Background and Objectives

To ensure in-depth and diverse discussion I placed a premium on the need to bring together an interdisciplinary ensemble of experts and to orchestrate academic-practitioner interaction: while academics can think about various scenarios, practitioners can provide us with a sense of what can be done. I was also keen to ensure that there would be an inter-disciplinary element to the workshop hence participants were selected from differing discipline and methodological backgrounds.

The idea underpinning the workshop was the need to explore the changing contextual environment within which the Euro-parties operate and to provide a forum for the discussion of their development as organisational entities. In so doing, I wanted to ensure that the Euro-parties received full attention rather than being confused/conflated with the European Parliamentary Groups. The goal of the workshop was to investigate the intersection of the constitutionalisation and institutionalisation of the Euro-parties in the European Union and in turn the role and significance of the Euro-parties within this context. The discussion centred upon the:

- European People's Party (EPP)
- Party of European Socialists (PES)
- European Liberal Democratic and Reform Party (ELDR)
- European Federation of Green Parties (EFGP)
- Democratic Party of the Peoples of Europe / European Free Alliance (DPPE-EFA)

It seems that at the point of potentially their most significant development (the new paragraph added to Article 191 of the EC Treaty; the promulgation of the regulation on party financing) the Euro-parties also face their greatest potential crisis:

- a continuing lack of visibility and linkage vis-à-vis European citizens;
- 'brand-dilution' in the face of their own enlargement;
- Euro-party design – as organisational and ideational entities are they able to keep up with the institutional developments that are taking place around them?

Such issues, along with the possibility of the formation of a number of new Euro-parties in the wake of the new financing regulation, are all contributing to an atmosphere where the role and significance of the Euro-parties required examination. In seeking to do this the Workshop was built around four distinct, yet interwoven, thematic panels:

- *Defining the Euro-parties.* Here the goal was to explore the conceptual and theoretical definitions of the 'transnational political party' in the context of the EU. Could anything be learned from the experiences of national party development?
- *The Euro-parties in a legal/constitutional environment.* Here the goal was to

consider the implications of Article 191 of the EC Treaty and the impact that the statute on party financing was likely to have and assess the claim that ‘...the Party provides the group with a framework for establishing the overall political guidelines for its actions within the Parliament. The lesson for the future is clearly that the more the EU develops, the more we need to harness the synergy between Group and Party.’ (Bo Manderup Jensen, Secretary General of the ELDR Group)

- *Euro-parties and European citizens.* Here the goal was to analyse the Euro-parties in their wider institutional and societal environment in order to ascertain their real-world significance and relationship with European citizens. This would rest on the notion of ‘linkage’. In addition why do they appear to have been overlooked in favour of civil society in the Commission *White Paper on Governance*? Yet are simultaneously seen as helping ‘...to create the right conditions for forging the much needed link between the institutions – the European Parliament in particular – and the citizens of the Union’. (R. Prodi)
- *The Euro-parties and Enlargement.* Here the goal was to analyse the role of the Euro-parties in influencing party developments in central and eastern Europe in parallel with the organisational and operational impact that their own enlargement is likely to have? The general proposition was that enlargement offers both opportunities as well as potential pitfalls for the institutionalisation of the Euro-parties.

## **2. Conclusions/Outcomes**

Although there was a general feeling that if they did not exist then the Euro-parties would have to be invented we were less sure as to precisely what sort of role the parties should play within the European arena. What was uncontested was that the Euro-parties had to show themselves to be capable of bringing an ‘added-value’. But this, of course, would require the appropriate organisational capacity to undertake such a role. Thus, expectations in relation to the development of euro-parties need to be set relatively low for it seems that at a time when the Euro-parties are seeking to enhance their own role and significance it is a time when the European public is turning away from traditional party oriented politics. In that sense the financial provisions associated with the party statute could actually result in a ‘cartelization’ of the Euro-parties further consolidating their distance from the European public. Future development therefore remains tied to many factors beyond the control of the Euro-parties.

The innovative organisational format of the workshop (small group thematic panels followed by plenary-style report-back) nurtured a participatory atmosphere in which the participants engaged in a free and frank style. By generating discussion in this manner it is hoped that the next stage of the project (the written papers) will have greater depth and awareness of how each theme fits into the overall framework. This is intended to give the projected output a much greater sense of cohesiveness and appeal. *Much of the success of the event can be put down to the extent of the academic-practitioner interaction and the willingness of all concerned to engage in an open and comprehensive discussion.* One practitioner commented that the workshop ‘offered a valuable opportunity to meet with academics and people from the other Euro-parties.’

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## ESF Exploratory Workshop – Scientific Report

### General Overview

The Euro-parties represent important institutional and ideational settings that occupy part of the European space. Within this arena the push-pull tensions between the national and European level are a constant source of tension. Could the Euro-parties act in a pacifying manner by offering linkages between the two levels? Are they capable of fulfilling such a role, and, even if they are capable are they likely to be given the necessary institutional lee-way and organisational support to carry it through?

In the past few years there has been a resurgence of interest in euro-parties as they have sought to raise their profile within the institutional framework of the EU. This has included highlighting their usefulness as co-ordinating mechanisms for the wider party family i.e. their national (component) parties; their European Parliamentary Group; and in the context of the pre-summit party leaders' meetings. Concomitantly though the Euro-parties remain weakly institutionalised and their umbilical organisational and financial connection to the EP party groups have stunted their development.

### Panel Objectives and Output

#### Panel One – Defining the Euro-parties

The remit of this panel was to explore conceptual and theoretical definitions of the 'Euro-parties' in the context of the EU as a developing non-state polity. Could they, or should they, seek to develop national party qualities? How does their legal and financial position, as well as their role, differ from national political parties? How have they sought to embed themselves within the EU framework (institutionalisation)? How can we define the Euro-parties? The Convenor put forward a 3-way typology as a starting point for describing the generic role(s) of the Euro-parties within the EU institutional architecture (see table one) which was followed by a typology that sought to describe the internal make-up of the parties (see table two)

#### Table One: what role for the Euro-parties?

- Euro-parties as facilitating bodies for national party leaders.
- Euro-parties as 'value added' *meta networks* with a political and organisational reach (dependent on resources).
- Euro-parties as representative vehicles for an emerging European *demos* built upon mass-type party qualities

**Table Two: Party Streams**

- Stream 1 – national party leaders whose ‘transnational’ roots, such as they are, lie in the elitist genesis of the Euro-parties as ‘support groups’ for party leaders.
- Stream 2 – the staff, officials and national representatives on the Bureau’s/Secretariat of the European Party itself. Belief that working in such an environment inculcates the ideas associated with a transnational identity.
- Stream 3 – MEPs who make up the respective parliamentary groups should be seen as a conduit between the national and the transnational displaying varying levels of sympathy towards Streams 1 and 2.
- Stream 4 – local actors/organisations/groups at the grass-roots level who seek to enhance or develop transnationalist practice via the democratisation of the internal structures of the Party. This may include the development of a mass-party type organisational structure, which is capable of connecting with civil society.

1. It was clear from the discussion that such a conceptualisation highlighted the tensions between ‘supranationalist’ and ‘intergovernmentalist’ elements within the parties and that so much of the agenda that the Euro-parties had to deal with was beyond their control. While the European Parliamentary Groups had a certain amount of leverage over the national parties the Euro-parties did not. In a situation where national parties, for example, were seen as providing the remit as to what the Euro-parties could do (and indeed had hived off limited responsibilities to them) what incentives were there for the national parties to strengthen the role of the Euro-parties? The irony was that increased support for the Euro-party was likely to come from a particular national party when that party was in opposition because the Euro-party offered a route, via other members of the party family, to the top table of the European Council and Council of Ministers.

2. The issue of how the institutional framework of the EU impacts upon the development of the Euro-parties emerged as a major concern. If the EU is to develop as a non-state polity then what impact does this have upon the distribution of power and the Euro-parties as power-seeking organisations? In turn does evolutionary development of the Euro-parties problematise the notion of ‘political party’ which has always been grounded to the nation state especially if the former is seen as an attempt to usurp competences from the latter? Some argued that the term ‘party’ was a misnomer and that its use was a mistake. Under these circumstances viewing the Euro-party as a co-ordinating mechanism within a wider network was seen as one viable alternative approach.

3. It was clear that participants were well aware of the need to divorce Euro-party development from national party development though both have and are likely to continue to face similar pressures. The fact that the Euro-parties had emerged during the era of ‘permissive consensus’ consolidated the elitist essence within their genetic structure. Breaking away from this was likely to be a particularly difficult process with the various streams jostling for position. It was suggested that perhaps the US model of party was the most fruitful way forward i.e. a loose party structure and organisational lee-way via which forms of ‘enhanced cooperation’ could be developed.

4. All were agreed that the Euro-parties had to show that they could play a constructive role and bring a value-added.

## **Panel Two – The Euro-parties in a legal/constitutional environment**

The goal here was to consider the implications of Article 191, the regulation on party financing, the role of the Euro-parties in the Convention and to assess the prospect that these developments are likely to necessitate a re-evaluation of the relationship between the Euro-party and their respective European Parliamentary Groups and national member parties? While one could point to an array of rhetorical discourse that the Euro-parties mattered how this translated into reality was less clear.

1. It was already clear that the changing legal structure was having an impact as the European Federation of Greens was changing their Statutes so that they could register as an EU party and a number of the European Parliamentary Groups (the UEN and the GUE-NL) were following a similar trajectory. Yet the complexity of the funding arrangements actually represented a considerable obstacle for the effective running of the EPs, particularly the smaller parties whose staff are likely to be consumed by the bureaucracy.

2. Some expressed concern that the Euro-parties were often at the bottom of the ‘food-chain’ within their own party family and had to plead to be included in the loop. The general critique that was often aimed at them was that they simply didn’t matter and that they failed to provide a value-added. The fact that their position/role within the EU architecture had yet to consolidate raised a pertinent question: are MEPs the national parliamentarians of national parties or the European parliamentarians of the Euro-parties?

3. It was generally recognised that the role of the Euro-parties in the Convention, especially in the case of the EPP, was not insubstantial. Does this provide evidence that they can influence the nature of the debate at the European level?

## **Panel Three – The Euro-parties and European Citizens**

The goal here was to analyse the Euro-parties in their wider institutional and societal environment in order to ascertain their real-world significance and relationship with European citizens. Can they help to enhance the legitimacy of the EU? How are they nested within the wider EU political structures and emerging EU civil society?

1. There was a feeling that if the EU is to develop as a non-state polity, the Euro-parties should play some sort of role in this by providing representational linkage with European citizens by contributing to the formation and crafting of a European *demos* – the development of which could be reliant upon some form of party democracy. If national parties are not interested or incapable of forming a linkage between the EU and EU citizens then perhaps the Euro-parties can perform such a role? In turn though a capacity to inform, galvanise, reflect and perhaps even craft public opinion would seem to be a prerequisite. But how likely is this?

2. An on-going problem, particularly for the academics was the question of

democracy at the European level. What form would it take? There are no models offering guidance and no working model of a supranational citizenship.

3. It was perhaps too much to ask that the Euro-parties be asked to solve the oft-cited 'democratic deficit' problem but enhancing their role and significance has, at least, the potential to be seen as a step in the right direction. However, and this was an important qualifier, as highlighted in some of the other panels, the changing structural conditions for the Euro-parties is likely to bring a great deal of uncertainty, not least what is 'actually' going to happen once the Euro-parties break the umbilical cord with the European Parliamentary Groups.

4. All of the Euro-parties have been grappling with the issue of individual membership for a number of years. Although the Greens, ELDR and EPP have provisions for membership the PES does not stemming from the view that membership, as presently constituted, is little more than symbolic.

5. While there remains plenty of symbolic (Article 191 of the EC Treaty) and self-ascriptive rhetoric as to why the Euro-parties should exist there was uncertainty as to whether this particular historical moment heralded the dawning of a new era not least because optimism at the end of the 1970s proved to be a false dawn.

#### **Panel Four – The Euro-parties and Enlargement**

The goal here was to analyse the role of the Euro-parties in influencing party developments and public opinion in central and eastern Europe in parallel with the organisational and operational impact that their own enlargement is likely to have? The general proposition was that enlargement offers both opportunities as well as potential pitfalls for the institutionalisation of the Euro-parties. It should not only be seen as a spur for enhancing institutionalisation at the EU level but also as a process that is going to necessitate a self-evaluation and overhaul vis-à-vis the organisational and operational dynamics to accommodate such an increase in size. However, the increase in size is also likely to bring tensions in terms of Euro-party identity. Despite the smiles, warm handshakes and 'family' photo stresses 'identity dilution' is a problem that will have to be faced. As one participant put it '...the identity of the new comers does not rest on the old federalist assumptions.'

1. In terms of the process associated with enlargement it was pointed out that this was a steep learning curve in itself and that mistakes had been made along the way: some parties for example had been let in too early. It was also the case that enlargement had been carried out in a rather one-sided way: 'If you want to be in then this is what you have to accept.' There was little sense that newcomers would be asked 'what is your definition of social-democracy/Christian-democracy etc? However since becoming full members some parties have been seeking to flex their muscles: 'If you do not give us what we want we will organise a referendum to say no to enlargement' was the comment of one party.

2. It was generally felt that transnational party linkages had strengthened the democratic life across Europe. There was also evidence of a sense of convergence.

The example of the European Federation of Greens where western Greens had been allied with the left and eastern Greens with the right being a case in point.

3. It was remarked upon that the EPP and PES are likely to face particular push-pull tensions. The EPP may well face an internecine struggle over its foundational commitment to federalism and the attitude of members towards post-Communist successor parties within the PES. While the PES could face centrifugal pressures concerning the definition and role of social-democracy, their relationship with the USA, and an increasing confrontational approach amongst some of its new members to decision-making.

### **Concluding remarks**

Although there was a general feeling that if they did not exist then the Euro-parties would have to be invented we were less sure as to precisely what sort of role the parties should play within the European arena. What was uncontested was that the Euro-parties had to be able to show themselves capable of bringing an 'added-value'. But this, of course, would require the appropriate organisational capacity to undertake such a role. For some this meant moving away from heralding a future vision (for example a federalist Europe) towards one that addressed concrete policy issues.

A general feeling was that the development of the Euro-parties, in many respects, mirrors that of the EU *per se*. When a dynamic of integration prevails then the Euro-parties have the space to develop but when integration stagnates then so will the opportunities for the Euro-parties. In the meantime, though, as political organisations based on a structure of national component parts the need to socialise those national structures in a European discourse was seen as paramount. Such an undertaking could go some way to pacifying fears that the Euro-parties were seeking to encroach upon the competences of their national component parts.

Thus, expectations in relation to the development of euro-parties need to be set relatively low for it seems that at a time when the Euro-parties are seeking to enhance their own role and significance it is a time when the European public is turning away from traditional party oriented politics. In that sense the financial provisions associated with the party statute could actually result in a 'cartelization' of the Euro-parties further consolidating their distance from the European public. Future development therefore remains tied to many factors beyond the control of the Euro-parties.

## **Assessment of Results/contribution to the field/outcome of the workshop**

In my desire to move beyond the traditional workshop format where participants are given 15-20 minutes to present (often polished pieces that have just been or are about to be published) I wanted to take a step back i.e. I wanted to nurture an environment from which people could return home and then begin the process of putting pen to paper.

In terms of the intellectual content of the workshop comments were made to the effect that the programme was well conceived and had considerable mileage both in terms of the individual thematic panels and as a whole. The emphasis upon institutionalization and the attempt to begin to map out the Euro-parties from a generic external perspective and a more specific intra factional viewpoint was generally well-received. The fact that the subject matter has longevity and that the development of the Euro-parties remains in a *statu nascendi* provides a rich and fruitful research stream. The nature of the subject matter also ensures on-going academic-practitioner engagement opportunities.

Thus I think it would be fair to say that the central achievements of the workshop are very much related to the potential that it has unleashed rather than immediate quantifiable outcomes. This therefore puts a great deal of emphasis upon me to ensure the continuation of the network. To that end I have already been in contact with an editor of a European-oriented journal, with a proposal for a special issue, who commented:

‘This sounds interesting. We have one special issue lined up for this year and possibly one for next and, with three issues per year, we wouldn't want to go beyond one special issue per annum. However, let me have a chat with the other editors because the subject is so germane to the journal and the quality of the contributors is so high. I'll get back to you as soon as I can.’

During the summer of 2004 I will endeavour to apply for a ESF Network status.

More immediately as a result of the Workshop, I have been asked to participate in a number of projects:

- I have been approached by Dr. Manfred Sapper (Redaktion Osteuropa) to contribute to a special issue of *OstEuropa*. My remit is to produce a piece on the role and influence of the Euro-parties in the enlargement process. My name was passed to the editors by one of the participants of the workshop.
- Dr Erol Kuachi another of the participants is putting together a group of scholars to write a manuscript on ‘Europeanisation and political parties’ As well as myself Erol was able to get a number of other workshop participants on-board: Professor Christopher Lord, Professor David Hanley and Professor Attila Agh.
- Professor Luciano Bardi has asked me to join a network that he is hoping to construct to deal with certain aspects of Euro-party development.



**Final workshop programme  
Tuesday, December 16, 2003**

Arrival of participants

**Wednesday, December 17, 2003**

8.30 - 9.00am	Registration and Coffee
9.00 – 9.20	Opening remarks from Dr Stephen Day (Convenor) and Dr John Coakley (European Science Foundation Representative)
9.20 - 10.30am	Keynote speakers – Explaining the significance and role of European Political Parties (Arnold Cassola, European Federation of Greens and Professor Chris Lord, University of Leeds)
10.30 – 11.00am	Coffee
11.00 – 1.00pm	Opportunity for each of the participants to provide a short comment on their particular orientation/position regarding the significance and role of the European political parties and to raise questions they feel the other panels should address.
1.15 – 2.30pm	Lunch
2.30 – 5.30pm	Thematic Panels – participants divided into four groups, which will deal with one of the themes. One Chair and Rapporteur to run the panels. Each member is asked to put forward a 5-minute position/proposition which will be followed by discussion.
4.00 – 4.30 pm	Coffee
Evening Meal (7.30pm)	Shengs (Chinese) Restaurant – about 5-10 minute walk from the workshop venue.

**Thursday, December 18, 2003**

8.30 – 9.00 am	Coffee
9.00 am-1.30pm	<i>Report Back</i>
9.00-10.00am	Theme 1 – report back from <i>rapporteur</i> followed by discussion
10.00-11.00am	Theme 2 – report back from <i>rapporteur</i> followed by discussion
11.00-11.15am	Coffee

11.15-12.15pm	Theme 3 - report back from <i>rapporteur</i> followed by discussion
12.15-1.15pm	Theme 4 – report back from <i>rapporteur</i> followed by discussion
1.30 – 3.00pm	Lunch
3.00- 5.00pm	Plenary Roundtable – ‘European Political Parties: thinking the future’, led off by Ton Beumer, General Secretary, Party of European Socialists and Professor Geoffrey Pridham, (University of Bristol)
5.00 – 5.15pm	Closing Remarks – Dr Stephen Day on the legacy of the workshop and possible publishable outputs.

## Final List of Participants (Contact details)

### Practitioners

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**Last minute withdrawal**

Professor Hieronim Kubiak, [uskubiak@cyf-kr.edu.pl](mailto:uskubiak@cyf-kr.edu.pl)

Institute of Sociology, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland had to withdrawal at  
the last moment due to ill health but still wishes to maintain contact.

### Statistics

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Number</b>
Belgium	1
Dutch	2
German	4
Greek	1
Hungarian	1
Italian	1
Maltese	1
Swedish	1
UK	9
US	2
Total	23

### Age Profile

<b>Age-range</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
20-30	5
30-40	6
40-50	6
50plus	6