



# Advocating for further integration: Europarties in the 2024 European Parliament elections

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## Abstract

The main Europarties have for decades championed the cause of further integration. Utilizing their internal networks and working together in the EU institutions, the Europarties have consistently called for a more democratic and stronger EU. Focusing on the three largest Europarties, the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), this UI Paper examines their positions on the institutional development of the Union. The manifestos for the 2024 European elections contain few concrete reform proposals about EU governance, suggesting growing internal divisions inside the main Europarties. When including the smaller Europarties in the analysis, the Greens stand out with their explicitly federalist manifesto. The paper also discusses the factors shaping the Europarties' positions and whether the national member parties are really committed to them. When they are not, the decoupling between national and European level campaigns weakens the cohesion and influence of the Europarties.



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## Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	2
<i>Introduction</i> .....	4
<i>Europarties as advocacy coalitions</i> .....	6
<i>The manifesto development process</i> .....	7
<i>Comparing the manifestos</i> .....	11
EPP, PES and ALDE: absence of concrete proposals .....	11
Bringing in the smaller parties .....	13
<i>Summary</i> .....	15
<i>Concluding reflections</i> .....	17
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	20





## Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections come at a crucial juncture for the European Union (EU). With the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis, and continuing economic challenges, there are difficult questions about the future direction of EU policies. Divisions among the member states have resulted in calls for more efficient EU decision-making, yet the growing support for populist and radical right parties across the Union indicates that large sections of EU citizens are opposed to further transfers of authority to “Brussels”. The rise of the far right – and its predicted success in the European elections (e.g., Cunningham et al. 2024; Hix & Noury 2024) – has been especially problematic for centre-right parties, which are often internally divided into more conservative and liberal camps.

In this paper, we are not making predictions about the outcome of the forthcoming EP elections. Instead, we contribute to the debate through comparing the 2024 European election manifestos of the “Europarties”, political parties at the European level. Our main focus is on the European People’s Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), but our analysis also includes the smaller Europarties. We pay particular attention to what they are advocating for the institutional development of the EU. The national member parties of the Europarties typically

run their own campaigns and have their own election manifestos, but it is important to study the Europarties’ manifestos, as the Europarties are highly influential actors in EU governance and more broadly in European politics. Through their national heads of government, EP groups and Commission portfolios, Europarties are in a powerful position to shape the laws and policies of the EU as well as the broader development of European integration.

Table 1 lists the Europarties, their EP political groups and political families.<sup>1</sup> It is important to clarify these terms. Europarties and their EP groups are officially independent of each other, but it is nonetheless more realistic to view them as part of the same Europarty organization. Political groups exist in the Parliament, while Europarties are extra-parliamentary organizations that bring together national parties across the EU to pursue shared political objectives and to field candidates for leading positions in EU institutions, not least the post of Commission president (the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism). Political family in turn refers to a group of parties with similar origins or ideological programmes. The literature on political parties primarily employs the concept of ‘party family’, but we utilize instead ‘political family’, as the Europarties often use that term when speaking about themselves.

Theoretically, we build on advocacy coalition framework (ACF) research. It emphasizes

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<sup>1</sup> Table 1 excludes Volt, a federalist pan-European party that has national branches. The German

branch won a single seat in the 2019 EP elections (Otjes & Krouwel 2023).



**Table 1. Europarties, their EP political groups and political families.**

<b>Europarty</b>	<b>Political group in the European Parliament</b>	<b>Political family</b>
European People’s Party (EPP)	Group of the European People’s Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP Group)	Christian Democrat / (Liberal) Conservative
Party of European Socialists (PES)	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)	Socialist / Social Democrat
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE)	Renew Europe Group (Renew Europe)	Centrist / Liberal
European Democratic Party (EDP)	Renew Europe Group	Centrist
European Green Party (EGP)	Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance (Greens / EFA)	Green
European Free Alliance (EFA)	Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance	Regionalist
Identity and Democracy Party (ID)	Identity and Democracy Group (ID)	Nationalist / Eurosceptic
European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR)	European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)	(National) Conservative
Party of the European Left (PEL)	The Left in the European Parliament Group (GUE / NGL)	Left / Democratic Socialist
European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)	ECR, EPP	Christian–Social

Source: Adapted from Van Hecke et al. (2018: 16); website of the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (APPF): [www.appf.europa.eu/appf/en/home/the-authority](http://www.appf.europa.eu/appf/en/home/the-authority).

shared core beliefs within the coalition and provides a useful analytical tool for capturing the transnational partisan dimension of European integration, an element of EU governance that has received insufficient attention. Throughout past decades, the main party families have – both individually and together – shaped the broader process of European integration and EU decisions in various policy areas. Yet to succeed, relative numerical strength is not enough; internal

cohesion and capacity for mobilizing the networks and key individuals for the joint cause are also required (Johansson & Raunio 2019, 2024).

The paper proceeds in four steps. First, we engage briefly with ACF, outlining its central concepts and applicability to studying Europarties. After that we turn to the internal dynamics of the Europarties, exploring their manifesto development processes. The



empirical section investigates European election manifestos with particular attention to institutional issues. Our analysis suggests that especially the centre-right – EPP and ALDE – is struggling to maintain internal cohesion. The European Green Party (EGP) stands out with its explicitly federalist manifesto. In addition, we observe a contextual difference: in the 2019 and particularly in the 2024 elections, the manifestos of the Europarties contained very few reform proposals, whereas, in between the elections, the transnational partisan actors did not hesitate to campaign for stronger EU institutions. In the conclusions, we discuss the factors shaping the Europarties' positions and whether the national member parties are really committed to them. When they are not, the decoupling between national and European level campaigns weakens the cohesion and influence of the Europarties.

## **Europarties as advocacy coalitions**

Conceptually, we view Europarties as transnational advocacy coalitions, an argument we present in more detail in our forthcoming book (Johansson & Raunio 2024). Advocacy coalitions are groups of like-minded actors, representing various organizations, who share beliefs and engage in coordinated activity and attempt to influence policy. ACF thus sees political actors as members of coalitions.<sup>2</sup> Echoing Sabatier (1998), who pioneered ACF in the

1980s, Ingold (2022) noted that ACF provides a suitable framework for studying EU policymaking, as it can be utilized for understanding how different public and private actors belonging to different countries and acting at diverse levels coordinate their efforts in pursuit of shared objectives. ACF guides scholars towards looking beyond mere intergovernmental relationships and formal EU institutions.

ACF has rarely been applied to party-political actors. This is surprising, given that political parties work to influence public policy and are sources of advocacy. Johansson (1999) uncovered a transnational advocacy coalition, particularly among the Party of European Socialists, behind the employment initiative (EEI). It included trade unions and political parties as well as governments and EU institutions, and key individuals within them. Those constituting the advocacy coalition favoured an employment title in the revised Treaty, and stronger coordination between member states regarding employment policies. While national governments were involved and pivotal for the outcome, the policy change was largely driven by transnational advocacy (see also Ladrech 2000; Lightfoot 2005). PES championed the employment chapter or title in the Amsterdam Treaty that came into effect in 1999. In another case study, Johansson and Raunio (2005) analyzed the emergence of Europarty funding. They explored how cross-party coalitions capitalized on “incomplete contracts” ever since the opening created by the Party Article

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<sup>2</sup> For overviews of the ACF research programme – key aspects and publications – see Jenkins-Smith et al. (2018) and Cisneros (2021).



in the Maastricht Treaty, and how they successfully and continuously argued for a stronger position for the Europarties. Along similar lines, broad cross-party advocacy explains the subsequent regulations on European political parties and foundations, including their funding.

The transnational parties keep up the momentum and bring together European and national political actors to discuss EU reforms. These transnational coalitions include Europarty central offices, members of the EP (MEPs), Commissioners, political foundations, various interest groups, youth and women's branches of the Europarties, as well as national member parties. The Europarties mobilize networks, pool resources and share information. It is the strength of the coalition that really matters – and strength has three components: numerical presence, capacity to mobilize and ideological cohesion. While there are limits to their agency, Europarties impact EU decision-making. The Europarties have evolved and strengthened their own organizational capacity, including through funding, but nonetheless remain constrained by their national member parties. Therefore, we view them as transnational and not supranational actors. We identify Europarties as stable and institutionalized advocacy coalitions, but also recognize that their membership and internal power dynamics vary over time and depend on specific circumstances.

## **The manifesto development process**

Manifestos set out the visions and priorities of political parties ahead of elections. Manifestos may also contain a narrative in which the party wants to highlight its identity and orientation. Research on party manifestos usually focuses on the content of the final manifesto and less on the process leading to that outcome. There is variation in how manifestos are created, and the process may look different from one election to another. In some parties, the process is decentralized and inclusive, with participation of party members. In others, it is very much centralized to the party leadership. In any case, an organizational framework is required for these processes and that involves decisions about internal structures and distribution of power.

In the case of Europarties, deliberations take place vertically between national and European levels and horizontally between various EU level actors. Manifestos are adopted, often triumphantly and with assurances of unity and shared beliefs, yet the final document is based on extensive bargaining inside the advocacy coalition. There are both formal and informal exchanges, together in Europarty meetings and bilaterally between individuals and member parties. Europarties must mobilize support at different levels – with coordination from party central offices in Brussels. Each office sits in the middle of the network of member parties and organizations, including the political



foundation linked to the Europarty, and is also interlinked with the EP political group.<sup>3</sup>

The organizational structures of the Europarties are broadly similar, and the formal process of working out and approving the manifesto is regulated in their statutes or internal regulations. In practice, the extent to which the different actors are involved in drafting the manifesto may be different from what is formally stipulated. In general, however, the manifesto must be approved by the congress, formally the highest decision-making body.

The EPP held its congress on 6–7 March 2024 in Bucharest – its 28th congress since the first, held in 1978. On the first day, a special panel was dedicated to the presentation of the EPP’s electoral manifesto. The discussion concluded with a vote on the manifesto, which was unanimously approved. The final version of the manifesto presented to the congress is dated 1 March, suggesting it was subject to discussion until only a few days before. There had been debates and exchanges over several months. When the EPP political assembly met in Brussels in mid-November 2023, preparations ahead of the 2024 EP elections were on the agenda.<sup>4</sup> At

the meeting of the EPP political assembly in Brussels in late January 2024, there was an exchange of views on the manifesto.<sup>5</sup> Earlier the secretary-general of the EPP, Thanasis Bakolas, when asked about the manifesto, commented that the document was an “early draft” that would be amended following the political assembly meeting. However, he said he was proud of the process that he and Manfred Weber, the EPP president, had “put in place” to gather views from the EPP member parties, and that the result was the “product of engagement and participation, not a *fait accompli* that will be served to our members.”<sup>6</sup> This highlights how Europarties assert themselves, but also their delicate balancing act in relation to national member parties.

The PES election manifesto was adopted unanimously at the election congress held in Rome on 2 March 2024. According to PES website, the manifesto was the result of “an extensive process of consultation and reflection within the PES family, with input from trade unions and civil society.”<sup>7</sup> And, of course, the manifesto had been drafted with input also from PES member parties and organizations. Altogether the various meetings and feedback amounted to over

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<sup>3</sup> The European political foundations close to EPP, PES and ALDE, respectively, are: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (WMCES), Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and European Liberal Forum (ELF).

<sup>4</sup> EPP Political Assembly meets in Brussels, 14 November 2023, [EPP - European People's Party - EPP Political Assembly meets in Brussels](#).

<sup>5</sup> EPP Political Assembly, 29-30 January, 26 January 2024, [EPP - European People's Party - EPP Political Assembly, 29-30 January](#).

<sup>6</sup> Europe’s conservative bloc calls for dropping ban on car engines, tripling border guards, *Politico*, 18 January 2024, [Europe’s conservative bloc calls for dropping ban on car engines, tripling border guards – POLITICO](#).

<sup>7</sup> PES adopts manifesto for 2024 European elections, 2 March 2024, [PES adopts manifesto for 2024 European elections – The Party of European Socialists](#).





550 policy priorities and measures. These exchanges contributed to the resolution adopted by the PES congress in Málaga in November 2023, which was referred to as “the starting point” from which Europe’s social democratic family would create its manifesto over the coming months. Between the two congresses, drafts of the manifesto were prepared inside the PES, with member parties closely involved in the discussions. On 18 January, a PES coordination team met online. The next week, on 25 January, the PES presidency held an online meeting at which a new version of the manifesto – the third draft – was discussed.<sup>8</sup> And when PES held a meeting for campaign heads – that is, secretaries-general and campaign managers of the PES and national parties – in London on 29 January, one item on the agenda was the PES elections manifesto.<sup>9</sup> Another coordination team online meeting was held on 8 February, followed by an online PES

presidency meeting on 14 February that approved a new version of the manifesto.<sup>10</sup>

The ALDE electoral manifesto was adopted at its extraordinary congress in Brussels on 20–21 March 2024 in connection with a “campaign kick-off”.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the congress was an opportunity to discuss the manifesto and vote on amendments and the entire text.<sup>12</sup> ALDE seemed to have a hard time reaching agreement due to internal divisions. Reportedly, “ALDE members have been struggling to find their pick and have pushed their deadline, initially set last week, to reach an internal agreement.”<sup>13</sup> While ALDE eventually agreed on the joint manifesto, internal splits in the liberal family are visible in the form of three lead candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*) – Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, Sandro Gozi (EDP lead candidate), and Valérie Hayer (representing Renaissance, the party of French President Emmanuel Macron).<sup>14</sup> According to ALDE, the

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<sup>8</sup> Von der Leyen won’t rule out working with right-wing parties, *Politico*, 21 February 2024, [Von der Leyen won’t rule out working with right-wing parties – POLITICO](#); also Socialists ramp up attacks on conservatives and liberals in EU election manifesto, *Politico*, 29 February 2024, [Socialists ramp up attacks on conservatives and liberals in EU election manifesto – POLITICO](#).

<sup>9</sup> PES campaign heads meet to discuss path to European elections, 29 January 2024, [PES campaign heads meet to discuss path to European elections – The Party of European Socialists](#).

<sup>10</sup> Socialists ramp up attacks on conservatives and liberals in EU election manifesto, *Politico*, 29 February 2024, [Socialists ramp up attacks on conservatives and liberals in EU election manifesto – POLITICO](#).

<sup>11</sup> PRESS RELEASE - ALDE Party Congress confirms EU lead candidate and Manifesto, 21 March 2024,

[PRESS RELEASE - ALDE Party Congress confirms EU lead candidate and Manifesto - ALDE Party](#).

<sup>12</sup> Spitzenkandidaten and the upcoming EU elections, *Euractiv*, 25 March 2024, [Spitzenkandidaten and the upcoming EU elections – Euractiv](#).

<sup>13</sup> Liberal Renew manifesto sneak peek and bits from Bucharest congress, *Euractiv*, 7 March 2024, [Liberal Renew manifesto sneak peek and bits from Bucharest congress – Euractiv](#).

<sup>14</sup> European liberals defy conventions (again) and bet on three names for the EU elections, *Euronews*, 20 March 2024, [European liberals defy conventions \(again\) and bet on three names for the EU elections | Euronews](#). EPP’s lead candidate is the incumbent Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. For PES, it is Nicolas Schmit, currently Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights. EGP has two lead candidates, MEPs Bas



adoption of the manifesto was “the culmination of over a year of consultation among ALDE Party members, civil society, citizens and stakeholders”.<sup>15</sup> The manifesto was the product of joint work within the Europarty and its manifesto drafting committee with representatives from ALDE full members, the European Liberal Youth (LYMEC), the Renew Europe Group in the European Committee of the Regions, and ELF.

The start of the ALDE “2024 Manifesto Process” can be traced to autumn 2022.<sup>16</sup> In September that year, the drafting committee was formed and endorsed by the ALDE bureau. In October, work priorities were set and, through October–November, member parties submitted their feedback. The manifesto drafting committee met in Bratislava in early December 2022 in connection with the meeting of the ALDE council, bringing together the ALDE bureau, member party delegates and liberals from across Europe. Its work continued in 2023 through events such as expert workshops and public town hall meetings. There was also an opportunity to get involved in the drafting process and contribute to the

manifesto by submitting feedback on the ALDE website. According to ALDE, “all feedback is being evaluated and considered for integration into the final draft.”<sup>17</sup> A draft manifesto was prepared for presentation within ALDE in January 2024.<sup>18</sup> After being submitted for further consultation to ALDE’s national party members, the final version of the manifesto was then approved at the ALDE electoral congress in March. Throughout the process, there were consultations with member parties.

This brief comparison of how the main Europarties drafted their manifestos suggests interesting variation, with ALDE and PES involving their networks and “civil society” in the process to a larger extent than EPP. But there are also considerable similarities. Clearly, Europarties could do more to engage with their activists and networks, a theme we return to in the concluding section of this paper. Yet it is important to recognize that the drafting of election manifestos is preceded – and will subsequently be followed by – continuous exchanges within the respective transnational partisan coalitions. As the analysis in the next section illuminates,

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Eickhout and Terry Reintke. PEL nominated its president, Walter Baier, as the lead candidate. EFA has two lead candidates, Maylis Roßberg and Raúl Romeva. ECPM’s lead candidate is its president Valeriu Ghilețchi. ECR and ID have not appointed lead candidates.

<sup>15</sup> PRESS RELEASE - ALDE Party Congress confirms EU lead candidate and Manifesto, 21 March 2024, [PRESS RELEASE - ALDE Party Congress confirms EU lead candidate and Manifesto - ALDE Party](#).

<sup>16</sup> Manifesto 2024, [ALDE Party Manifesto 2024 - ALDE Party](#); see also ALDE’s innovative approach:

Engaging citizens in EP2024 manifesto development, *PartyParty*, 20 February 2024, [ALDE’s innovative approach: Engaging citizens in EP2024 manifesto development - PartyParty \(political.party\)](#).

<sup>17</sup> Manifesto 2024, [ALDE Party Manifesto 2024 - ALDE Party](#).

<sup>18</sup> EU liberal party ALDE’s manifesto targets ‘EPP-led’ Commission, vows single market revival, *Euractiv*, 31 January 2024, [EU liberal party ALDE’s manifesto targets ‘EPP-led’ Commission, vows single market revival – Euractiv](#).



manifestos are informative not only in the sense of what parties advocate for – what is left out of the documents can be even more significant.

## Comparing the manifestos

We start the analysis of the 2024 European elections manifestos with the three main Europarties – EPP, PES, ALDE – and observe developments in their positions since the 2019 elections. After that we include the smaller Europarties in the comparison. The final part of the section summarizes the findings.

### EPP, PES and ALDE: absence of concrete proposals

The European People’s Party is known for its commitment to European integration, but its long manifesto is essentially all about policies and says very little, if anything, about institutional questions. It proposes a “Commissioner for Security and Defence, who will better coordinate defence issues within the framework of EU competences and promote cooperation, as well as a Defence Council with defence ministers of Member States”, and to “replace the High Representative with an EU foreign minister, as Vice-President of the European Commission.” However, beyond such institutional consolidation of foreign and security policy, the manifesto stays silent about the broader architecture of EU governance. EPP does not call for more powers for the Parliament or demand increased use of majority voting in the Council, themes that have appeared semi-automatically on its previous “shopping lists” (EPP 2024).

The much shorter PES manifesto is also marked by absence of concrete reform proposals. It supports “the implementation by Member States of the Young European Socialists’ demand to lower the voting age to 16 in the European elections.” The manifesto further states that “The EU must speak with one voice in foreign policy matters and move towards more majority decisions in certain policy matters” (PES 2024).

ALDE stands out with its more detailed positions. Regarding the EP, it “advocate[s] for a single seat for the European Parliament, with right to initiate legislation and power to cast a no-confidence vote against any member of the European Commission.” It goes even further by stating that “ALDE Party continues to fight for transnational voting lists.” ALDE wants to “transform the European Commission into a true political leadership body and ensure efficient governance and decision-making by breaking down the siloed approach, which leads to overlapping and contradictory legislation.” As for foreign and security policy, it seeks to “establish a European Commissioner for Defence, to ensure a unified approach to EU security and defence policy”, and to “strengthen the EU’s role on the global stage by acting as one: shift to qualified majority voting in foreign affairs, defence and security policy, preventing individual countries from obstructing our joint ability to act.” On a more general level, the manifesto champions the “reform [of] the EU decision-making procedure to ensure efficiency also with a larger number of Member States and diverging views” (ALDE 2024).

Comparison of the 2019 and 2024 election manifestos suggests that the EPP, at least,



has become more divided internally. In contrast with the 2024 manifesto, its 2019 manifesto put forward concrete proposals for developing the EU's political system: it argued that "the European Union must become a fully-fledged parliamentary democracy", called for "granting the European Parliament the right to initiate legislation" and "strengthening both the European Parliament and national parliaments at their respective levels", while stating that "any future President of the European Commission must first have run as the Lead Candidate of his or her European Party. Candidates should have to defend their programme for Europe and explain to people what it is they stand for ... the choice about the future direction of our continent must be put into the hands of the citizens" (EPP 2019). ALDE called for Treaty reform: "We support initiatives to re-evaluate and re-negotiate of the division of competencies between the European Union and its Member States", while arguing for "greater involvement of the European Parliament in decision-making by giving it the right to initiate legislation, and a greater degree of transparency of negotiations and voting within the European Council, and the Council of the EU" (ALDE 2019). Turning to PES, it produced a short manifesto that only included general references to democracy and participation (PES 2019). As in the 2024 elections, the manifestos focused overwhelmingly on policies, arguing overall for a stronger EU in the service of its citizens.

Another point of comparison is the Conference on the Future of Europe held in 2021–2022 (Abels 2023). Designed as a unique experiment in bottom-up deliberative democracy, it also provided the Europarties with an opportunity for advancing their objectives. Free from the constraints of the usual manifesto development process, the main Europarties and their political groups put forward notably ambitious proposals.<sup>19</sup> EPP, PES and ALDE were all ready for Treaty change, which stood in contrast to the positions of the majority of national governments at that time. In fact, the Europarties tended to see the Conference as a kind of sounding board and platform for proper Treaty reform, resulting in a European constitution. The Europarties did not directly call for major changes to the balance of power between the EU institutions, but all three political families supported considerably stronger competences for the Parliament – extending the co-decision procedure to all policy areas, the right of legislative initiative, increased budgetary powers, a larger role in economic governance and external relations, and improved control of the Commission, including the right to remove individual Commissioners. The EPP Group and S&D supported the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. S&D and Renew Europe were in favour of transnational lists, while the EPP was against. The Europarties favoured the application of qualified majority voting in the Council across all issues.

Overall, the main Europarties and their EP groups agreed about reinforcing both the

close interaction between them throughout the process and especially in the run-up to the Conference.

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<sup>19</sup> It is also possible that the strongly pro-integrationist proposals are explained by the fact that they were officially adopted by the EP groups instead of the Europarties. However, there was





role of the Parliament and the leadership capacity of the Commission – thus signalling their clear support for strengthening supranational elements in EU decision-making. The Conference also saw considerable cross-party cooperation between the main Europarties. Such joint advocacy was particularly pronounced inside the Parliament between the political groups of the three Europarties (Johansson & Raunio 2022a, 2022b).

### **Bringing in the smaller parties**

Too often scholars focus on the larger Europarties and their EP groups, or on the Eurosceptical parties, thereby ignoring the full spectrum of transnational partisan actors. By contrast, we include all Europarties in our analysis. We now turn to the smaller ones – EDP, ECPM, EFA, PEL, EGP and ECR. At the time of writing, the Eurosceptical ID had not adopted an election manifesto.

We start with the European Democratic Party, which sits in the liberal group in the Parliament and fields its own lead candidate in the elections. Its long and detailed manifesto is “federalist”, arguing in favour of “a defence union and an energy union by eliminating the right of veto, facilitating the initiatives of peoples and states who wish to accelerate their political union, creating new own resources and strengthening the European Parliament while reducing the number of Commissioners. Reforming the treaties to achieve these essential changes and move forward with continental unification is imperative.” EDP recommends the establishment of a “treaty revision convention to abolish unanimous voting in the Council”, and “giving “national and regional parliaments with legislative powers

the possibility of suggesting legislative initiatives at the European Union level in the future by providing a specific mechanism for this purpose in the regulation governing the European Citizens’ Initiative”. Significantly, EDP advocates “transnational lists in European Parliament elections” and argues in favour of “strengthening European political parties and foundations”, particularly through “the capacity of political parties and movements to conduct transnational political campaigns”. It further calls for “the possibility of electing a president of the European Union from electoral lists common to all European countries (merging the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council)” (EDP 2024).

Member parties of the very small European Christian Political Movement sit in the EPP and ECR groups, and this is reflected in its manifesto. ECPM advocates “longer debate times in the European Parliament on important issues”, is “committed to strengthening the role of the European Parliament as the direct and most proportionate elected representation of the European citizens” and “supports the Spitzenkandidat process”. At the same time ECPM “is critical of the European Commission’s right of initiative, which leads to imposing Regulations and Directives on Member States by unelected bureaucrats, legislation acts which often go further than the founding treaties intended” and argues that “more control should be returned to national parliaments, which would also increase their responsibility” (ECPM 2024).

The manifesto of the European Free Alliance, the coalition of regionalist parties,



understandably focuses on the rights of minorities in EU member states and on facilitating their influence in European level policymaking. EFA seeks to reform the European Committee of the Regions: “rather than being merely an advisory body without real power, it should be able to influence and amend European legislation.” It also champions the consolidation of the European Citizens’ Initiative, which “must be reformed to deliver on its promise, and the Commission should have to make a legislative proposal as a result.” Regarding the EP, EFA states that “the European Parliament must also have the right to initiate legislation”, and that “the President of the European Commission must be democratically elected, on the basis of a proposal by the European Parliament” (EFA 2024).

Turning next to the Party of the European Left, its manifesto states that the “directly-elected European Parliament must have the right to initiate legislation, to propose laws, to elect the European Commission, to propose and decide on the EU budget and to control the activities of the European Central Bank”, and that “policy areas of shared competence must be democratised, with the directly elected European Parliament and the national parliaments playing the central role.” PEL “reject[s] the abolition of the unanimity principle in the European Council” in foreign and security policy. More generally, it is “in favour of a thorough public debate on the future of the EU, involving national parliaments, the European Parliament and civil society” (PEL 2024).

The green party family has become strongly pro-European since the 1990s, when many

green parties were opposed to or at least highly critical of European integration. The manifesto of the European Green Party is, in many ways, explicitly federalist: “the European Union needs to reform its treaties and move forward towards a federal Europe”. Overall, EGP supports the proposals emerging from the Conference on the Future of Europe and stands for “a federal Europe, for a fully fledged supranational democracy able to deliver.” EGP goes furthest in demanding gender balance in EU politics: “we defend a binding parity mechanism for the lists in the European elections and gender balance in EU decision-making, including for the top jobs.” It argues that “the European Parliament must have the right to propose legislation and equal budgetary power”, and that “the EU budget should be raised significantly with an expanded role of the European Parliament and civil society in monitoring EU spending.” According to EGP, “the President of the European Commission should be proposed by the European Parliament.” It calls for EU-wide lists: “transnational lists for the European Parliament should be introduced alongside national lists, creating an additional single EU-wide constituency to which citizens elect a large number of MEPs.”

EGP wants to promote direct and participatory democracy:

the Greens will push for the introduction of citizens’ panels to make EU policy choices more inclusive. The framework for petitions and specifically the European Citizens Initiative must be strengthened to open more



channels for citizens to influence EU policy and oblige the European institutions to respond with legislative proposals. A framework for EU-wide referenda should be introduced.

Regarding the Council, the manifesto states that “we will work towards overcoming unanimity in the Council that is currently hindering accession” and that “the Council of the European Union should act as a second chamber for EU law-making, not the venue for late-night haggling over inter-governmental deals.” Greens are known for underlining the importance of transparency, and EGP believes that “the EU institutions must become more transparent, including through the pro-active publication of all documents on ongoing legislation. These should also include member state positions as it remains virtually impossible for citizens to understand how decisions are made in the Council.” Finally, EGP advocates Treaty reform through a wide-ranging consultation process and a referendum: “Treaty changes should then be ratified through a Europe-wide referendum according to a double majority system of votes cast: Europe-wide

and in a majority of member states” (EGP 2024).

The Eurosceptical alternative is presented by the European Conservatives and Reformists. It was long unclear whether ECR would produce a manifesto, but it finally did, in late April. Probably reflecting divisions among member parties, the manifesto is brief and quite general.<sup>20</sup> It does not address institutional questions beyond stating from the outset that “we oppose any attempt to further centralise the EU and the extension of qualified majority voting in areas from which it is currently excluded. The role of the European Commission should not be mistaken for a government of a European super-state.” Reflecting its anti-immigration policies there is at least one area where ECR would like to see a stronger EU: “We are also committed to reinforcing agencies like Frontex and Europol to help Member States fortify our external borders” (ECR 2024).

## Summary

Comparing the manifestos is not that straightforward: their length varies, some are more detailed, others just list bullet points. PES in particular writes short manifestos. We

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<sup>20</sup> ECR adopts manifesto but snubs lead candidate pick amid rifts, *Euractiv*, 25 April 2024, [ECR adopts manifesto but snubs lead candidate pick amid rifts – Euractiv](#). While the manifesto does not mention the Spitzenkandidaten system, the party is opposed to the mechanism: “The party also agreed not to have a lead candidate. This was justified by a number of factors, such as the hype over the Spitzenkandidat system having ended since the 2019 elections, with it now being common knowledge that the leading candidate system was never fit for purpose. In declining to nominate a candidate for the top position, the ECR is sending a strong signal that the party

remains true to its line that it was never in favour of the Spitzenkandidat system. Meanwhile, the same federalist groups that pushed for a top candidate in 2019 have subsequently deviated from their own principle, showing that the whole approach is useless. The ECR favours sticking to what the Treaties say, which is that it is the Council’s prerogative.” ECR Party adopts manifesto for European elections, decides not to put forward a lead candidate, 24 April 2024, [ECR Party adopts manifesto for European elections, decides not to put forward a lead candidate - ECR Party](#).



must also remember that parties approach them strategically: the content of the manifestos reflects not just the priorities of the Europarties, but also the context of each election. Therefore, it is perfectly understandable that, in the 2024 elections, essentially all Europarties devote much space to security policy and the war in Ukraine, climate change and sustainability. In terms of policies, differences are found mainly on how to balance economic growth with environmental protection and in various socio-cultural questions.

The manifestos should also be viewed as indicators of parties' internal unity. More general and vague programmes suggest intra-party divisions; detailed documents with concrete reform proposals suggest ideological unity. Party size matters here. Larger Europarties, such as EPP and PES, have a wide variety of national member parties, each with its own preferences, whereas smaller Europarties have fewer members and therefore probably find it, on average, easier to agree on common objectives. However, we believe that the lack of concrete reform initiatives, and the avoidance of institutional questions, illuminate the increasing challenges inside PES and particularly EPP. Interestingly, ALDE reportedly encountered divisions during the drafting of the manifesto, yet its programme contains specific proposals regarding EU governance.

So how to identify the true positions of the Europarties? What do they really stand for and advocate, even behind the scenes? Such questions are why we also briefly examined the goals of EPP, PES and ALDE in regard to the Conference on the Future of Europe, in

which these key Europarties, individually and together, pushed strongly for a more supranational EU, with further empowerment of the Parliament and majority voting across all policy areas in the Council. In the Conference, the EPP Group and S&D supported the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, while S&D and Renew Europe championed transnational lists. Notably, each of the three largest Europarties advocated Treaty change. While these documents were adopted in the name of the EP groups, there was nonetheless close correspondence within the respective Europarty coalitions. This suggests continued advocacy for closer integration, despite the 2024 election manifestos focusing almost exclusively on policy questions.

In terms of ideology, a moderate left-right pattern emerges. The green political family in EGP stands out with its explicit advocacy of a federal Europe. PES and PEL are, in general, supportive of moving EU governance in a more supranational direction, but so is the liberal party family, both ALDE and EDP. On the centre-right, EPP, referring to its "founding" role in European integration, has traditionally advocated stronger EU-level democracy, but the party has clearly become more divided over the future development of the Union. The Eurosceptical and conservative ECR adopted a manifesto in which it is committed to safeguarding member states' sovereignty.

Overall, the Europarties support a stronger Parliament, particularly through the right of legislative initiative. Only ECPM explicitly refers to the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism, yet several state that the Commission president should be elected on a proposal by





the EP. ALDE, EDP and EGP advocate transnational lists. However, while most Europarties would like to see extended use of majority voting in the Council, only EGP directly calls for a more radical overhaul of the whole EU political system. The Greens also emphasize direct and participatory democracy, although all Europarties speak positively about engaging with citizens and civil society actors.

## Concluding reflections

This paper has examined the 2024 election manifestos of the Europarties. Our main focus has been on EPP, PES and ALDE as the largest Europarties that share a commitment to European integration, but we also included the full range of Europarties in our analysis. As advocacy coalitions, the Europarties have over several decades mobilized their networks behind Treaty reforms and other initiatives, moving the EU towards a more supranational direction. This advocacy has been consistent and has built on networks that have broadened through subsequent EU enlargements and the gradual consolidation of Europarty funding and organization. While remaining heavily reliant on national member parties for support, Europarties carry agency and use it through organizing joint action and connecting people in their networks.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, they contribute to learning and to socializing actors into norms and beliefs.

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<sup>21</sup> Studying the internal dynamics of the Europarties is very challenging, as much of their activity is informal and takes place away from the public eye. There should be more attention in research to life inside Europarties – to informal practices and personal exchanges between the actors involved. Future research should also

However, the successful advocacy for deeper integration has also brought about increased politicization of the EU, both nationally and at the European level. And this contestation about the future evolution of the EU is reflected inside the Europarties.

We discovered a notable absence of concrete institutional reform proposals in the manifestos of the two largest party families, EPP and PES. Two potential explanations appear relevant. First, in election manifestos, it is safer to focus on policies as opposed to institutional matters that may appear distant and “elitist” in the eyes of citizens. And to be sure, the manifestos of EPP, PES and ALDE advocate a stronger EU across a variety of policy sectors, from economy and competitiveness to immigration and climate change. Considering the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is understandable that the main Europarties pay particular attention to security and defence policy, arguing that EU should be a more effective actor on the global stage. The commitment to integration remains therefore intact, as shown also by the positions of the three Europarties in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Yet our analysis also raises questions about the internal cohesion of the main Europarties. Inside advocacy coalitions, power can shift, and disagreement can result in “lowest common denominator” compromises. In particular, centre-right

examine hierarchies and power relations among actors within these transnational partisan coalitions, for a deeper understanding of how people act in advocacy coalitions and contribute to coalitions in their different phases.



parties across Europe have become increasingly divided over questions of national sovereignty, and this may explain the non-committal of EPP to institutional reforms. The rather generic nature of the PES manifesto suggests similar challenges inside the social democratic family. Interestingly, ALDE puts forward more concrete proposals than do the two largest Europarties.

Including the smaller Europarties brings more variety to the table. The Greens campaign on an explicitly federalist manifesto, calling for a fully-fledged supranational Union, EDP has also a federalist-minded programme, while EFA has a different take on European democracy, with its defence of regional and local actors. ECR stands out with its defence of national identities and sovereignty, but ID failed to adopt a manifesto. A more coherent Eurosceptical alternative would facilitate contestation across the EU in European elections – and also in the European Parliament, where the groups of ECR and ID have managed to endure but have also been the least cohesive of all the political groups (Hix & Noury 2024). Overall, the left-leaning Europarties are somewhat more in favour of supranational reforms, especially if EGP is included among their number.

We also looked at the process of drafting manifestos inside the largest Europarties. PES and ALDE engaged more than EPP with their networks, including, to some extent, with activists. Yet, overall, Europarties could clearly do much more in terms of involving different actors in the formulation of election manifestos and other position papers. This would add an important dimension to the already existing European or transnational

civil society, where a variety of sectoral interest groups and issue-based civic associations coordinate their activities and unite individuals from across the EU. Europarties have introduced membership for individuals. However, in her pioneering study, Hertner (2019) showed that Europarties had only very small numbers of individual members, while national member parties were often against giving individual members stronger participation rights, such as in leadership selection or policy formulation. Interestingly, Hertner (2011, 2019) showed how, before the 2009 EP elections, the PES had launched an open consultation process that enabled the activists and other stakeholders to send in their contributions. The activists clearly appreciated the consultation process, as did many MEPs and national member parties, and it resulted in a comprehensive election manifesto. This indicates that grassroots members are willing to participate if given meaningful opportunities.

However, in our opinion, the biggest challenge in terms of campaigns concerns the continued, and perhaps even increasing, decoupling of national and European-level campaigns. European elections have been held since 1979 every five years, but Europarties and their manifestos remain very much in the margins of the campaigns. National parties and individual candidates often highlight country-specific themes and there is a notable discrepancy between the manifestos of national parties and their respective Europarties (Sigalas & Pollak 2012; Hackemann 2023). A national member party might therefore be incentivized to distance itself from its Europarty when the position of the national party, and particularly its



supporters, differs from that of the Europarty. For example, a national party might be less “federalist” than the Europarty.

The challenge is how to make the European elections more “European”, and unfortunately there are no easy solutions. It is understandable that many Europarties have advocated the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism and transnational lists, but member states remain opposed to EU-wide lists and the future of the lead candidate system is uncertain (Ceron et al. 2024). Member states and their national parties also remain opposed to binding EU laws that would influence candidate selection or campaigning by national parties. Much thus depends on ideological and programmatic cohesion inside the Europarties. The price of the current situation is high: it is difficult for

citizens to learn what the Europarties stand for and how they shape EU decisions, and the gap between national and European levels is not going away any time soon.

To conclude, the forthcoming European elections will shape the direction of EU politics for the next five years. Europarties are key actors in negotiating EU’s “top jobs” and the composition of the Commission will reflect the outcome of the elections (Kreiling 2024). Europarties really matter, even between elections. How to make more EU citizens aware of their significance is no easy task. Europarties themselves can only do so much: the responsibility lies with national member parties and the media.



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