

# Stronger European Political Parties

by Wouter Wolfs

## Summary

European political parties are essential for democracy at the EU level. In the treaties it is stipulated that they contribute to forming the political awareness of and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union. However, the various rules that Europarties are confronted with at the European as well as the national level create significant barriers to their development and activities, and as such, prevent them from maximising their democratic potential. This paper offers nine different actions structured into three programmes that would give rise to stronger European political parties, greater engagement from EU citizens and a stronger EU dimension for the European elections.

**Keywords** European political parties – EU democracy – Citizen involvement – European elections

## Introduction

The regulatory framework for European political parties is rather complex, as they are governed by a wide range of legislative and implementing acts, at both the EU level and the national level. The most important are Regulation no. 1141/2014 on the statute and funding of European political parties, and Council Decision 2018/994 amending the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage.<sup>1</sup> This electoral framework is too rigid in a number of aspects and hampers the organisational development of European political parties. In the three programmes outlined below, initiatives are put forward that would transform the Europarties into stronger extra-parliamentary party organisations, engage citizens more closely in their activities and decision-making, and give the parties a larger role in the European elections.

## A stable regulatory environment

The first programme aims to create a stable regulatory environment that would allow the Europarties to develop into strong extra-parliamentary organisations and would contribute to the development of a level playing field among political forces.

## Complete the ratification of the revised EU Electoral Law

The negotiations to revise the EU Electoral Law reached a stalemate during the previous legislative term of the European Parliament.<sup>2</sup> The European Parliament has made a number of proposals to improve the European dimension of the EU ballot, which could also strengthen the organisational aspects of European political parties. These include a common electoral campaign period across the entire EU, the obligation for all political parties and other entities participating in European elections to observe ‘democratic procedures and transparency’, and the creation of a Union-wide constituency (with a uniform electoral system), with the

---

<sup>1</sup> European Parliament and Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) no. 1141/2014 on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, OJ L317 (22 October 2014), 1; Council Decision 2018/994 amending the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, annexed to Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom of 20 September 1976, OJ L178 (13 July 2018), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, ‘Proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, repealing Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom and the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that Decision’ (20 May 2022).

option for associations of citizens to submit candidates for this new constituency.<sup>3</sup> The adoption of these changes would bring the EU Electoral Law into the twenty-first century and would substantially expand the role of the Europarties during and beyond the European elections (see also Programme 3, Project 1).

### **Simplify the registration procedure for new European political parties**

European political parties (and European political foundations) can obtain a specific legal status under EU law. Yet, the conditions that currently have to be met to obtain this status are rather stringent: a Europarty (1) needs to have its registered seat in one of the member states, (2) must participate—or intend to participate—in the European elections, (3) must not pursue a profit, (4) must observe the founding values of the EU, and (5) must be represented by its member parties in the European Parliament, the national parliaments or the regional parliaments in at least a quarter of the member states (or have received at least 3% of the votes cast in a quarter of the member states during the most recent European elections).<sup>4</sup> This last condition is especially demanding: in practice, this means that Europarties—through their member parties—need to have obtained seats in national or regional elections (or at least 3% of the vote in the European elections) merely to obtain legal recognition. The condition also solidifies Europarties as de facto umbrella organisations of national member parties and is oblivious to the possibility of organisational alternatives. An important reason for these demanding conditions is that acquiring legal status provides the parties with almost immediate access to EU subsidies. The only additional condition for public funding is the requirement to have one affiliated Member of the European Parliament, which is a criterion that all registered Europarties easily fulfil. While such a high threshold could be defended for access to European subsidies, lower conditions to obtain official status would provide new European movements with the legitimacy of legal recognition. In other words, minimal thresholds for the official establishment of new parties would foster openness and a level playing field in the European party system, and consequently strengthen participation and political pluralism in the EU.<sup>5</sup>

### **Reform of the party finance rules**

The rules on the legal status and funding of European political parties are currently too rigid and present challenges to the parties' activities and to the ways in which they are organised. A higher level of funding—and a more equal distribution of (some of) the subsidies—would provide more organisational stability: if some of the public funding was not tied to the obligation to match the subsidies with a party's own resources, this would create a basis for organisational stability. In addition, more flexibility would be welcome on the expenditure side. Currently Europarties are prohibited from directly or indirectly supporting national political parties or candidates. While a ban on direct financial support can be defended (because this entails the risk of Europarties becoming nothing more than vehicles for the distribution of EU funding to national parties), there should be more flexibility with regard to providing indirect support to national member parties, as this would allow for a stronger collaboration between the two levels.

---

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament, Legislative resolution on the proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, repealing Council Decision (76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom) and the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that Decision (2020/2220(INL)—2022/0902(APP)), OJ C465 (3 May 2022), 171.

<sup>4</sup> Art. 3 of Regulation 1141/2014. For the European political foundations, slightly different conditions apply.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see L. Norman and W. Wolfs, 'Is the Governance of Europe's Transnational Party System Contributing to EU Democracy?', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 60/2 (2022).

## Bridging the gap with the people of Europe

European political parties can play a more active role in connecting European citizens (from both within and outside the EU) to the entire EU political system. The second programme sets out three proposals to strengthen the linkage function that Europarties fulfil in European democracy.

### Democratic bridge-builders

European democracy is party democracy. This is also acknowledged in the EU treaties, in which it is stipulated that European political parties ‘contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union’.<sup>6</sup> This aspiration has also been the main justification for providing Europarties with direct financial support from the EU budget.<sup>7</sup> Yet, apart from this declaratory provision in the treaties, there have been hardly any attempts to further develop and operationalise this democratic role that the Europarties are expected to play. This stands in stark contrast with some national practices, where the constitutional position and democratic function of political parties is the object of legislation and extensive discussion among legal and political theorists. Consequently, a more refined and detailed argumentation in the rules of what the core democratic functions of Europarties are—and how these differ from the role and purpose of European Parliament groups and national parties—could provide a clearer definition of them as the main democratic linkage organisations at EU level.

### Democracy-building abroad

European political parties are not only beneficial for democracy within the EU but also outside the Union, particularly in the candidate countries. They are an important tool to link the political elites in those countries with the political leaders and establishment in the EU, and as such fulfil an important democracy-building role.<sup>8</sup> The incorporation of political parties from the candidate countries into the organisation and functioning of the Europarties contributes to capacity-building and eases the possible later transition of the political class of the new member states into the political life of the Union. Currently, European political parties are not allowed to accept membership contributions from parties outside the EU, relegating the latter to the status of second-class membership. It is argued that the opposite approach should be taken, providing Europarties with more opportunities and instruments with which to engage non-EU parties in their day-to-day functioning (by collecting membership fees, for example). This is especially important for parties in the EU’s neighbouring countries.

### Democracy-building at home

European political parties have an important linkage function between citizens and the EU political system. From this perspective, more could be done to involve citizens—as individual members—in the internal decision-making of the Europarties, for example, in the development of the manifesto or the selection of the party’s lead candidate for Commission president or Europarty leadership.<sup>9</sup> The regulatory framework could provide incentives to the Europarties for establishing stronger citizen involvement. One way would be to distribute (some of) the public funding among the parties based on the number of individual members they have—the party finance system in the Netherlands could act as an interesting model in this respect. Another way would be to introduce sufficient *citizen* support—in the form of signatures—as an alternative to *parliamentary* support in a quarter of EU member states as a condition to gain official status as a European political party under EU law. Inspiration could be drawn in this respect from the conditions that have to be met to register a European Citizens’ Initiative.

---

<sup>6</sup> Art. 10 Treaty on European Union.

<sup>7</sup> W. Wolfs, *European Political Parties and Party Finance Reform: Funding Democracy?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, K. M. Johansson and T. Raunio, ‘Political Parties in the European Union’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2019).

<sup>9</sup> I. Hertner, ‘United in Diversity? Europarties and Their Individual Members’ Rights’, *Journal of European Integration* 41/4 (2019).

## Raising the electoral stakes

Free and fair elections are one of the core features of a democracy, with political parties acting as the main ‘linkage’ between the citizens and the political system. Parties present their manifestos to the voters and compete for the power of public office and a mandate to turn their political positions into policy actions. However, the way in which the European elections are currently organised does not allow the Europarties to reach their full potential. This third programme aims to raise the electoral stakes by giving them the means to operate as genuine campaign organisations.

### Simplicity

A significant impediment to European political parties being able to conduct truly transnational EU-wide campaigns is the plethora of different electoral rules in the member states. While the EU Electoral Law provides a general framework for the European elections, the elections are predominantly regulated at national level. Consequently, Europarties are confronted with 27 different regulatory frameworks with substantial differences regarding, for example, fixed electoral periods, ceilings for campaign expenditure, bans on certain campaign tools (such as billboards, campaign rallies, television or radio commercials), and donations or other sources of campaign income.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, more simplicity in the electoral regulatory environment is required. While a total transfer of the management of the European elections to the EU level seems unfeasible (at least in the short term), a harmonisation of national electoral and campaign finance rules would provide more simplicity, and facilitate the cross-border campaign efforts of the European political parties.

### Visibility

Currently, European political parties suffer from a lack of visibility during the European elections: since they are not—in a formal sense—standing for election, their names are often absent from the debates and they are barely recognised by voters. Therefore, measures should be introduced to raise Europarties’ visibility in the run-up to the European elections. This could be done by displaying their names and logos on the electoral ballots (next to those of their national member parties), and on the campaign materials of the national parties. This also makes the affiliation between national and European parties—and their corresponding groups in the European Parliament—clearer, and as such helps to strengthen the European dimension of the electoral debates and communication. It also forces the national parties to defend their respective Europarty’s *Spitzenkandidat* and common manifesto, and to take responsibility for their collaboration with other national parties and for policy initiatives of their European Parliament group.

### Capacity

A successful electoral campaign requires substantial financial resources, especially if it concerns an EU-wide campaign over 27 different countries. The total campaign expenditure during the 2019 elections for all the European political parties combined was just over €12 million, and it is not expected that this number will be substantially higher for the 2024 elections. This is far less than the national parties spend in several member states, and not sufficient for a campaign on a continental scale. An important reason for this sum being relatively small is that campaign expenses are taken from the operational grants to the Europarties. Consequently, spending too much on electoral expenses could jeopardise the day-to-day functioning of the party organisation. Therefore, in addition to their regular operational grant, in election years a separate campaign grant should be provided to European political parties for spending solely on electoral expenses. This grant should not be tied to a specific co-financing obligation (as is the case for the operational grant). This would allow the Europarties to develop extensive campaigns without threatening the rest of their activities.

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations, *Provisions of National Law Affecting European Political Parties and European Political Foundations* (Brussels, 2023).

## Conclusion

While the European political parties are entrusted with an important democratic mission in the EU treaties, the current regulatory environment substantially curtails their ability to live up to their full democratic potential. This paper has highlighted nine specific proposals grouped into three programmes (see the table below) that could help the Europarties to consolidate their position as extra-parliamentary party organisations, strengthen their links with European citizens and play a more prominent role in the run-up to European elections.

	<b>Programme 1</b>	<b>Programme 2</b>	<b>Programme 3</b>
	<b>Creating a stable regulatory environment with European political parties as strong extra-parliamentary organisations</b>	<b>Bridging the gap between the people of Europe and European political parties as the representatives of European citizens</b>	<b>Raising the electoral stakes by allowing European political parties to act as campaign organisations</b>
<b>Project 1</b>	Complete the ratification of the latest proposal amending the EU Electoral Law.	Define and empower European political parties as the core democratic linkage organisations in the EU’s democracy.	Harmonise national electoral and campaign finance laws (e.g. common closing of the polls, electoral periods, spending thresholds).
<b>Project 2</b>	Simplify administrative procedures for the registration of European political parties to enable stronger pluralism, contestation and participation.	Allow European political parties to engage non-EU national parties in their internal organisation.	Introduce measures to increase the visibility of European political parties in electoral campaigns (compulsory display of Europarty names and logos on electoral ballots and national party campaign material).
<b>Project 3</b>	Reform party financing and spending rules (more funding, and more leeway to finance weaker members and run campaigns outside of European Parliament elections, on non-EU issues and at all levels).	Provide a (financial) incentive to Europarties to enlarge and engage their individual membership bases.	Introduce a separate campaign grant to provide European political parties with the resources required to conduct electoral campaigns.

## Bibliography

Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations, *Provisions of National Law Affecting European Political Parties and European Political Foundations* (Brussels, 2023).

Council Decision 2018/994 amending the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, annexed to Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom of 20 September 1976, OJ L178 (13 July 2018), 1.

Council of the European Union, 'Proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, repealing Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom and the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that Decision' (20 May 2022).

European Parliament, Legislative resolution on the proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, repealing Council Decision (76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom) and the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that Decision (2020/2220(INL)—2022/0902(APP)), OJ C465 (3 May 2022), 171.

European Parliament and Council Regulation no. 1141/2014 on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, OJ L317 (22 October 2014), 1.

Hertner, I., 'United in Diversity? Europarties and Their Individual Members' Rights', *Journal of European Integration* 41/4 (2019), 487–505.

Johansson, K. M. and Raunio, T., 'Political Parties in the European Union', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Wolfs, W., *European Political Parties and Party Finance Reform: Funding Democracy?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).