**Exploring the Cave of the Unknown: Transnational Party Politics in the EU**

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***Books Reviewed:***

* Petra Ahrens, Anna Elomäki and Johanna Kantola (eds.)

*European Parliament’s Political Groups in Turbulent Times*.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

* Luciano Bardi, Wojciech Gagatek, Carine Germond, Karl M. Johansson and Wolfram Kaiser

*The European Ambition: The Group of the European People’s Party and European Integration.* Baden Baden: Nomos, 2020.

* Duncan McDonnell and Anika Werner

*International Populism: The Radical Right in the European Parliament*.

London: Hurst, 2019.

Party politics is one of the major strands of study of the European Union. Although the EU’s precursor, the European Economic Community (EEC), started off as an explicitly de-politicizing project, its expanding remit and institutional evolution quickly revealed the importance of party agendas for its development, particularly since the 1980s. However, fluctuations in the relative strength of political parties in Europe has been a major determinant of the history of European integration (Manow et al 2008). Christian Democrats shaped the outlook of the EEC in the 1950s, Thatcher’s Conservatives were instrumental in kickstarting the common market in the 1980s, resurgent social-democrats infused new ideas in the 1990s, and the dominance of the centre-right decisively conditioned the (non)response to the Eurozone crisis of the 2010s.

Focusing on EU institutions in particular, the heightened role of party politics is also evident. The main locus of party politics in the EU, the European Parliament (EP), has grown immensely in prerogatives and influence since its first direct election in 1979. As a result, a voluminous literature has studied the influence of party politics on the policy outputs of the EP (see in particular the seminal contribution by Hix et al. 2007). Party politics however has grown more important outside the EP as well. EU elites have seen in the trappings of party politics, like election campaigns, a solution to the problem of the EU’s ‘democratic deficit’. For example, although not uncontroversial, the idea that the post of Commission president should be up to partisan contestation, just like the head of the executive in any member-state, has gained significant ground, leading in 2014 to the ‘Spitzenkandidat’ experiment (Dinan 2015).

Party politics however has also been seen as a major determinant of opposition to the EU. Party ideologies are considered to explain significantly patterns of support and opposition to the EU and its various aspects at the national level (Hooghe et al 2002). In recent years, the multitude of crises the EU faced have been tied to party politics, from the emergence of left-wing populists in the EU’s South opposing austerity during the Eurozone crisis, to the internal splits of the British Conservative Party that paved the way for the EU exit referendum in the UK and eventually Brexit.

While the literature on the party politics of the EU is rich, important gaps remain. First, we still know little about the actual dynamics inside EP groups, how they operate and how they come to take the stances we measure (but see Kreppel 2002; Bressanelli 2014). Second, work on party families tends to be bifurcated between two strands that are rarely in conversation with each other, as well as being massively unbalanced in size. On the one hand lies the expansive literature on EP votes and policymaking. On the other hand lies research on transnational party federations, also known as ‘Europarties’, which remains extremely limited in size and scope still (for some exceptions see Bardi and Calossi 2009; Chryssogelos 2021; Hertner 2019; Van Hecke 2010). Yet these two ‘faces’ of transnational party politics exist in complex interaction, often with the same actors (e.g. MEPs) holding roles in both EP groups and organs of the transnational federations. Finally, work on Euroscepticism is overwhelmingly focused on the national level. While this is understandable, it ignores a major aspect of populist politics in recent years: its increasingly transnational character, as populists exploit international opportunities for exposure in the shape of cooperation, meetings and use of the very EU institutional settings that they presumably oppose.

Addressing some of these gaps, Bardi et al’s *European Ambition* offers a deep and comprehensive historical account of the role of the Christian Democratic party family as the core of today’s centre-right European People’s Party (EPP), and especially its EP group, in the development of European integration in a range of areas, including the institutional makeup of the Community and economic, social and foreign policies. The contributors show how the EPP was consistently supportive of deeper integration as well as increase in the importance of the EP. The chapters make extensive use of EU and EPP archives to create a thick narrative extending all the way back to the early days of the European Communities in the 1950s, when Christian Democrats were at the height of their influence in most of the then member-states. The authors identify key personalities of the Christian Democratic family, politicians as well as affiliated operatives working in the EP bureaucracy, and trace their networking and policymaking. The book ultimately shows that, through slow incremental processes and resourceful blending of behind the scenes lobbying and public pronouncements, the EPP has been largely successful in shaping European integration according to its preferences: a consistent strengthening of the prerogatives and prestige of the EP, and enhancement of EU powers steered towards the centre-right’s preferred policy goals. It also traces however the relative decline of the EPP’s federalist and integrationist spirit over the decades, as the group expanded from its original West European Christian Democratic core to include conservative and liberal parties after EU enlargements towards the South and East.

The volume performs a valuable service to EU studies by concentrating a vast amount of historical data through archival work and interviews with key participants. To a certain extent this is also a slight drawback, as the amount of information is sometimes overwhelming and the insistence on detail may discourage those with a more general interest in EU party politics. A persistent reader however will be rewarded with important insights about the dynamics of EU integration, particularly as they are placed in the *longue durée*. The authors for example substantiate long-standing impressions of the EPP’s workings, such as the crucial role of the German CDU, its relationship with the equally important Italian DC that determined the group’s priorities until the 1980s, and the importance of the Group leaders’ personal relations both with national leaders (such as Helmut Kohl) and important operatives in other EU institutions, especially the Commission.

It is in this last respect that the volume is particularly useful. The book moves beyond the reification of an EP group and its compartmentalization within Parliament, but instead dissects how it works both within itself and in relation to other actors outside the EP. MEPs are the most entrenched partisan actors within EU institutions in Brussels and it is natural that, beyond their formal duties, they are the point-persons for communication and coordination between members of a party family. The book shows that this was indeed the case well before the first direct election to the EP in 1979. From a conceptual perspective, the book invites the perspective of EP groups not only as parliamentary actors but also as the main institutional infrastructure of transnational party politics, much more than the skeletal Europarty offices.

If Bardi et al’s volume examines one EP group in a longitudinal perspective, Ahrens et al’s *Political Groups in Turbulent Times* expands the analysis to more party groups in the contemporary context. The picture that emerges is particularly complex, as EP groups contain multitudes of national interests that need to be coordinated in order for them to present a coherent position. Contributions in the book highlight how EP groups have developed increasingly sophisticated rules of procedure and permanent institutional structures that allow their leaders to coordinate the actions and votes of their members, as well as how they formulate their positions and interact in the less visible but potentially highly significant stage of negotiating legislation in parliament committees. Thus, the volume examines both intragroup and intergroup dynamics in the EP. In more general theoretical terms, as the editors state in the introduction to the book, its analysis can be seen as an addition to the debate on the democratic functioning of the EU from the perspective of *throughput legitimacy*, i.e., the processes through which decisions are made that has remained understudied and undertheorized relative to the primacy of input and output legitimacy as theoretical angles in the literature.

Ahrens et al’s volume paints a complete picture by accounting also for the *informal* nature of EP politics. Informality, which was acknowledged also in Bardi et al as important, is one of the least acknowledged parameters of parliamentary politics in the EU. The chapters in this book demonstrate the importance of informal interactions, networking and norms of procedure inside and between groups to capture fully what goes on inside the EP. This includes well-known and observed patterns like the centripetal orientation of the EP ‘party system’, dominated by the EPP-S&D ‘grand coalition’, but also less visible dynamics like the EPP’s relationship with groups to its right (chapter by Ripoll Servent). The volume also goes beyond these usual topics to cover important new ground, for example dimensions of hierarchy in EP groups like seniority and gender (chapters by Kantola and Miller). In this sense, Ahrens et al’s book is ultimately more than a study of EP institutional processes and politics. It is a sociological account of a dense institutional space whose actors are constituted by a web of formal and informal rules, practices and norms.

The book covers new ground also concerning the activities of Eurosceptics, especially on the right. For long dismissed as non-engaging and irrelevant for the work of the EP, the importance of these groups has risen since the majority of the EPP-S&D grand coalition has eroded and the relative weight of the populist right increased. Although this development has been seen by many as detrimental, analyses in the book present a more nuanced assessment. Thus, Börzel and Hartlapp argue in their chapter that Eurosceptic MEPs engage with the work of the EP in issues of their interest even in the committee stage, can form alliances with mainstream groups, and generally enrich democratic contestation and debate in the parliament by introducing new axes of ideological competition. Brack and Behm on the other hand see Eurosceptics as the de facto ‘opposition’ to the dominant centrist pro-EU groups, with soft Eurosceptics offering ‘critical’ opposition to decisions reached by centrists, and hard Eurosceptics engaged in ‘anti-system’ opposition focused on declaratory and publicity activities. While the latter appear often as crude and populistic in character, they still perform an important function in increasing the interest of the broader public in EP proceedings and, hence, improving its democratic standing.

This brings us to the book co-authored by McDonnell and Werner, who examine populist radical right (PRR) groups in the EP. Their focus however is less on the ideology or voting patterns of the PRR than the dynamics, processes and decisions that lead to the formation of EP groups in the right of the chamber. The puzzle they try to answer is why parties with high degree of policy congruence sit in different groups, as well move between them over time. The argument of the book is that, while ideological congruence generally matters for PRR cooperating in the EP, other considerations also play a role. Namely, PRR parties approach the question of EP membership with a firm eye at domestic reputational repercussions, particularly the all-important question of respectability. Although most of these parties present themselves as unabashedly anti-systemic in their national party systems, they also want to escape their toxic image and improve their electoral and office-seeking chances. The choice of international partners is important for these purposes, which explains why often PRR parties avoid association with likeminded parties from other countries that generate negative connotations for their domestic electorates.

McDonnell and Werner’s research, based on a number of remarkably frank and open interviews with PRR politicians and officials in Brussels and national capitals, reconstructs the complex decision processes of these parties as they approve some associations while shunning others. The interesting point is that parties theoretically committed to national sovereignty make use of the opportunities provided by EU institutions and international cooperation. Speaking time in the EP plenary provides valuable occasions for PRR leaders to make high-profile statements (especially those like Nigel Farage who were marginalized in their national political system), while the image of pan-European cooperation of populist nationalists legitimizes them as relevant players of European politics. Indeed, at the end of their fascinating and readable narrative, McDonnell and Werner conclude that the *international cooperation* of populists may actually be an intermediate state in the emergence of a genuine *transnational populism*, where these different nationalist parties will develop a common pan-national perspective of (white Christian) Europe as the heartland that must be defended from outside dangers. In this sense, what appears today as danger for the EU (the rise of Eurosceptic nationalist populism) may simply be the final labour pains before the emergence of genuine ideological transnational party politics in Europe.

Taken together, the three books advance significantly the study of transnational party politics in the EU. Beyond theoretical considerations and novel empirical findings, perhaps their key contribution is methodological. The main difficulty in the study of transnational party politics in the EU is establishing their tangible impact. Much of the alleged influence and practices of party families, Europarties and EP groups is predicated on high degrees of informality which is difficult to be captured in transparent and quantifiable ways akin to EP voting records.

The books presented here however show how this problem can be, at least partly, addressed. All three engage in painstaking qualitative research, combining process tracing, deep historical archival research and interviews to reconstruct the pathways of influence and networking between actors in the sidelines of formal procedures. This is an important complement to the standard quantitative analyses of EP voting. Particularly notable in this regard appears to me the chapter by Cherry Miller in the Ahrens et al volume, who presents the practice and implications of *parliamentary ethnography*, a methodology applying the logic of ethnography and anthropology to the workings of the European Parliament. It is a fascinating description of a novel perspective to parliamentary politics that appreciates the human, informal, networked and sociological nature of parliaments, something particularly relevant for a supranational setting like the EP containing a multitude of ideological, national and personal preferences.

The research designs of the three books however also offer some sanguine perspectives about the future course of the study of EU transnational politics. The first is that no amount of close qualitative, archival and interview research may be able to capture informality in its fullness. Additionally, such research methods can be energy and time consuming, requiring a level of involvement that may be difficult to justify when the tangible impact of party family activities is so difficult to quantify. Even in a work of immense and deep engagement with archives and high attention to detail such as Bardi et al, contributors at points had to concede that the informality of the processes they were describing inevitably made firm conclusions about causal links (e.g. between EP group activities and the direction of EU integration) speculative. Secondly, while works like these draw attention to an understudied yet important aspect of EU politics, establishing the relative importance of transnational party politics would still need to engage alternative explanations of policy outcomes and institutional developments. Until party-based explanations are placed next to rival hypotheses and rigorously tested against them, they will inevitably continue to be seen as secondary and ‘soft’ factors of EU politics.

Finally, in terms of substance, the subject matter of the three books can also be read as a discouraging sign for further work on transnational party federations – the ‘Europarties’ – which, as mentioned in the beginning of this review, remains quite limited. The three books trace the role and dynamics of transnational party politics through a close analysis of EP groups. This of course makes sense, since EP groups are much larger, more institutionalized and better endowed than the small offices of party federations, whose policy work is primarily of coordinating and facilitating nature. But if a large part of partisan networking and policy-influencing activities takes place through EP groups and MEPs, the question becomes whether research on Europarties would have the same added value that would justify similar amounts of qualitative and participatory research. In any case, future work on Europarties may have to see them within the broader framework of European party families, operating in tandem with EP groups, in order to establish the actual degree of their influence and importance (such that exists) in EU politics.

Overall, the three books pose the challenge to EU studies to take transnational party politics seriously, as well as to reconsider their importance and functions given their networked nature and informal influence. Perhaps the main change required for future research is one of mindset: appreciating that party politics may influence things in much more indirect but no less important ways than formal policymaking, EP votes or official decisions. Engaging in research of this kind is important, not only because it will provide a fuller understanding of how the EU operates, but also because it will highlight the still imperfect nature of the EU as a representative system.

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