Transnational European Party Federations as EU Foreign Policy Actors: The Activities of Europarties in Eastern Partnership States*

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Abstract

This article assesses how the involvement of European party federations (Europarties) in the politics of Eastern Partnership (EaP) states relates to the objectives of the EU in the region. Under specific scope conditions, Europarties can promote EU interests and values and help EU neighbourhood policy overcome some of the inconsistencies created by the lack of the enlargement tool. The article conceptualises Europarties as transnational actors whose external activities match the pathways of EU influence in EaP states. Empirically, by examining political developments in Georgia and Moldova, the article demonstrates how Europarties function as a conduit for EU strategic influence over pro-European elites, as well as a normative influence on the functioning of party politics in EaP states.

Keywords: Europarties; Eastern partnership; EU foreign policy; European People's Party; Georgia

Introduction

The EU eastern enlargement of 2004–07 and the establishment of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) brought the party systems of post-Soviet states onto the radar of transnational European party federations – most commonly referred to as *Europarties*. This article argues that interactions between Europarties and their affiliated parties in EaP states are an understudied but important complement to avenues of EU influence in eastern Europe, thus highlighting more generally the role of these (relatively neglected) actors of EU politics in EU's external relations.

The EU pursues both strategic and normative goals in the eastern neighbourhood. Formally the EU wants to promote 'democracy', the 'rule of law' and 'good governance' in the eastern neighbourhood. These goals are commonly associated with the EU's *normative* influence – the promotion of practices and norms of its economic and political governance beyond its borders (Whitman and Juncos, 2012, p. 154). At the same time, the EaP is also a region where the EU has tangible interests and geopolitical concerns (Youngs, 2009, p. 900). The new (reviewed in 2015) European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is 'based on the EU pursuing its interests, of which promoting universal values is one [interest] among many' – others including 'stabilisation, security, energy […]' (Dworkin and Wesslau, 2015). However, while developments of the last few years

(particularly Russian assertiveness) have increased the salience of strategic consider-
ations, the intergovernmental nature and the limited collective capacities of the EU
foreign policy system mean that normative considerations remain an important parameter
of its relations with the EaP – both as policy tools and as constitutive elements of EU
interests *per se*. For the EU '[l]egitimacy and instrumentalist dynamics co-exist and relate
to each other in complex ways' (Youngs, 2004, p. 431).

With this as a backdrop, the article assesses the external role of Europarties in EaP and
addresses the question of whether and how they complement the strategic and normative
avenues of EU influence in the region. By drawing on EU studies, transnational relations,
and comparative politics literatures, it argues that the nature of Europarties as actors
across the intergovernmental, national and societal levels within and beyond the EU is
commensurate with the multifaceted (strategic and normative) impact of the EU on its
neighbourhood. On the one hand, Europarty affiliation is an important channel for the ex-
ertion of leverage of the EU on elites in EaP states, and an instrument to co-ordinate po-
litical strategy with them. On the other hand, if we think of predictable and mature party
politics as one element of democratic governance, the effect of Europarties on volatile and
non-institutionalised eastern European party systems can be seen as transference of
European norms on how a democratic society should function. The argument has specific
scope conditions: the existence of reasonably open political arenas, and the support of a
country's pro-European orientation by a significant part of its elites. If these scope condi-
tions are met, Europarties can complement the EU's strategic and normative influence in
the region – that is, they are well placed to do both *external politics* and *external gover-
nance promotion*.

The article proceeds as follows: In the first section I present the main features of
Europarties as actors of transnational politics both inside and beyond the EU. The second
section outlines the challenges the EU faces in EaP and theorises how the activities of
Europarties as transnational actors correspond to and complement avenues of strategic
and normative influence of the EU in the region in the face of these challenges. The third
section contains an empirical demonstration of the argument, showing how Europarties
supported strategic goals and the promotion of norms of democratic governance by the
EU in Georgia and Moldova. The final section concludes the article.

1. Europarties: Transnational Actors In and Beyond the EU

Research on party politics on a European level has focused much more on the role of
European Parliament groupings (Van Hecke, 2010, pp. 395–396). Transnational party
federations, or Europarties, have attracted a proportionately smaller interest (see Bardi,
2006; Day, 2014; Deschouwer, 2006; Ladrech, 2006; Van Hecke, 2010). But it is high
time to start considering the role of Europarties in EU politics. The initiative of the major
Europarties to field candidates for the post of President of the European Commission in
2014 was only the most obvious and recent indication that they are asserting their pres-
ence in EU politics.

Europarties' most important function is providing a forum for co-ordination, commu-
nication and exchange between like-minded actors partaking in policy-making in the
EU. To this end, Europarties stage summits for their member-party leaders and
specialised meetings for party experts and/or like-minded ministers ahead of the plenary

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meetings of EU organs (summits of heads of state and government, ministerial meetings etc.). Beyond policy-making, Europarties organise the co-operation of their member-parties (Zur Hausen, 2008), maintain specialist partisan organisations (youth, students etc.) and political foundations (Gagatek and Van Hecke, 2014), and try to influence public discourse in Brussels and across Europe on behalf of their members. In the electoral arena, the Europarties co-ordinate their member-parties' campaign for the European Parliament elections by staging electoral congresses, publishing common manifestoes etc. (Gagatek, 2010).

Europarty activities are informed by the needs and positions of their member parties, but as actors of their own Europarties are uniquely positioned to infuse ideas in policy-making and shape the framework of policy debates in intergovernmental and supranational settings. On the other hand, Europarties also create and maintain networks of information exchange and policy-making along ideological and partisan lines, which cut across functionally defined networks.

The biggest Europarties have partners in non-EU states today, and have had throughout their history. Especially in countries eligible for EU accession, Europarty activity has effectively complemented EU conditionality. Europarties pushed not only for organisational changes in wannabe-affiliated parties in states close to accession, but they even influenced these parties' programmatic and ideological profile (most importantly, by pushing them to adopt unequivocally pro-EU programmatic positions) (Haughton, 2010; Pridham, 2014; Vachudova, 2008).[1] Europarties offered to partisan actors in central-and-eastern Europe (CEE) various benefits in return for ideological and organisational adaptation: positive exposure in international and national media, campaign assistance, a forum for the promotion of a party's (or government's) positions, new policy ideas, and a powerful signal of ideological identity (Klápačová, 2013).

This overview of their external functions in the EU's enlargement zone highlights the role of Europarties as non-governmental actors of world politics – a phenomenon examined especially in the transnational relations literature.[2] The emphasis of this literature is on the ways activities and contacts between non-governmental actors, and between non-governmental and governmental actors, across national borders affect outcomes of world politics – particularly through the exertion of normative influence on policy-making. Debates in this literature sensitise us to important questions about the external influence of Europarties.[3]

First, there is the question of the relationship between transnational actors and political and strategic interests of formal foreign policy actors. Most work on transnational actors in the post-Cold War era focused on actors pursuing normative goals (the spreading of new ideas, norms and understandings of legitimate practices) and challenging the centrality of the international state system. Conversely, little research exists on the ways transnational actors further strategic and diplomatic agendas, even though it can be assumed that 'their work often conforms to the interests of states and international organizations' (Risse, 2007, p. 260).

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[1] See Von dem Berge and Poguntke (2013) for a conceptual discussion of ways Europarties can impact on the party systems of new Member States.
[2] There is an interesting semantic analogy with the use by Van Hecke (2010) of the term 'transnational' when describing Europarties. Despite this, he made no further reference to the transnational relations literature.
[3] See an overview in Risse (2007).

Given the interpenetration of strategic and normative interests and tools in the EU's engagement with its neighbourhood, cloaking the discussion of Europarty activity in the EaP in the transnational relations literature carries some interesting analytical implications. On the one hand, one can locate this phenomenon within a broader swathe of activity by non-governmental coalitions, networks and actors with regard to the promotion of rules, norms and ideas in global (or in our case, regional) governance (Koenig-Archibugi and Zürn, 2006). On the other hand, one may contribute to this literature by evaluating how such actors promote specific strategic and political (not just normative) goals of a foreign policy actor with interests of its own, like the EU.

Second, the transnational relations literature raises the question of the domestic conditions of the impact of non-governmental actors. While the work on this issue is too broad to be effectively summarised here (see Risse, 2007, pp. 269–271), one of its main conclusions is that prior domestic institutional, ideational and political conditions significantly affect the extent and depth of influence by transnational actors in a given jurisdiction. In analyzing the ways Europarties impact on the domestic political arenas of EaP states, it is important to formulate theoretically informed propositions as to the conditions under which this influence will be significant or even possible.

In prospective EU members, the accession processes of new member-parties to Europarties *shadowed* the accession processes of these countries to the EU (Pridham, 2014). In countries lying halfway between Europe and their Soviet past, riven by ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions and with unstable national identities and institutions, achieving association with a Europarty should be a choice as monumental for national parties as it is for these countries themselves to move closer to Europe (even if EU membership is not immediately on offer). As we will see, much as in CEE in the 1990s this association comes with the promise of major opportunities (for interaction of politicians and cadres from EaP countries with EU actors, as well as for prestige and political support from abroad (Dakowska, 2002)) and therefore also with significant conditionality criteria (Timuş, 2014).

2. The EU in the EaP: Theoretical Expectations about the Role of Europarties

The Challenge of Domestic Politics in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The eastern neighbourhood is a highly important area for the EU's credibility as a foreign policy actor. Yet, for a variety of reasons, the EU cannot deploy in the eastern neighbourhood the most powerful foreign policy instrument that helped it wield potent influence in central and eastern Europe: the promise of enlargement.[4] This reflects specific strategic considerations, both external (an interest in the stability of the neighbourhood but also an awareness of Russia's role and of the delicate security and institutional conditions in many of the EaP members) and internal (divisions among Member States' attitudes towards the prospect of further enlargement and relations with Russia, an institutional overstretch after the enlargements of 2004–07, and the politically challenging climate created by the eurozone crisis).

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[4] For critiques of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) that touch upon the complications created by the lack of the enlargement promise, see chronologically Kelley (2006), Sasse (2008), and Lehne (2014).

The absence of credible enlargement commitment to the countries comprising the EaP means that the EU has limited *leverage* over them: with little that is tangible to offer to elites in the region, the EU has little direct capacity to foster democratic reforms through the intergovernmental channel (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008), as well as few political rewards to offer in exchange for EaP governments' pro-European strategic positioning. Another way for the EU to influence its neighbourhood would be to foster links on the societal level, cultivating cross-border transnational links between societal actors in Europe and post-Soviet countries (Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase, 2009). This is a long-term strategy (embodied for example in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum EaP-CSF) that seeks to create more positive social conditions for democratic rules and norms. But this avenue of influence – *linkage* – is also uncertain given the authoritarianism of state structures in many countries and the weakness of civil society in the region (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011).

Another way for the EU to shape its neighbourhood is the *external promotion of norms and practices of democratic governance*. The analytical study of this approach draws on network analysis and the governance turn in EU studies (Börzel, 2010; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006; Schout *et al*., 2010). It focuses on policy networks formed between EU and neighbouring state bureaucrats (Lavenex, 2008). It is pointed out that as part of this network of 'transgovernmental' contacts, the EU promotes, besides chunks of its legal order, norms of democratic practice such as accountability, transparency and participation (Freyburg, 2011). However this pathway of influence is not particularly more hopeful than others. In many cases rules and practices codified in transgovernmental agreements were never (or only poorly) implemented in practice (Börzel and Pamuk, 2012; Freyburg *et al*., 2009). Much like *leverage* and *linkage*, *external democratic governance* in the eastern neighbourhood is hampered by authoritarian state structures and weak civil societies (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011, pp. 896–897; Freyburg *et al*., 2011).[5]

This overview of the different avenues of influence of the EU on EaP countries points to the importance of the domestic political context as a conditioning factor for their effectiveness. This context is particularly challenging for the EU's influence in eastern Europe. After independence, post-Soviet regimes were for long identified as falling under one of the categories of hybridity between democracy and authoritarianism: semi-authoritarian (Kuzio, 2005), competitive authoritarian (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010), electoral authoritarian (Schedler, 2006), patronal presidential (Hale, 2006) etc. Political-economic oligarchic elites pursued personal agendas and manipulated ethnic and other allegiances in order to control state resources (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010, p. 61). Despite the existence of deep social divisions (ethnic, religious etc.), party politics in EaP states reflected mostly the infighting of these elites (Hale, 2006, p. 309).

Under these circumstances, party competition remained inherently unstable and weakly institutionalised. Political parties lacked such characteristics as rooting in social cleavages, internal democracy or programmatic consistency. Interactions between them did not follow any particular pattern (party 'non-systems'). Deeply ideological parties also tended to be the least successful. Generally, in semi-authoritarian contexts the main

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[5] For a similar argument concerning the role of domestic political structures as prerequisites for the success of democratic norm transfer in the southern neighbourhood see Van Hüllen (2012). However, see a more optimistic conclusion about the prospects of promotion of democratic norms and practices in Langbein and Börzel (2013).

structural characteristic of party competition is the dominance of one government party over small, weak and fragmented opposition parties. Depending on intra-oligarchic competition, party creation and disappearance was frequent.[6]

This absence of genuine party democracy reflected, underlined and accentuated the move of eastern European countries away from the EU in the 1990s and early 2000s both in strategic terms and in terms of their political and institutional outlook. It hampered the emergence of accountable political systems, perpetuated authoritarian or semi-authoritarian modes of governance, and decreased the incentives of governing elites for democratic and economic reforms, which in turn contributed to these countries' strategic de-alignment from the EU. Conversely, the EaP was launched around the time when the emergence of more democratic politics in some countries in the region gave impetus to their institutional and normative adaptation to European standards, which in turn reflected the (sometimes instrumental, sometimes sincere) preferences of parts of their elites to turn strategically to Europe. Yet this turn remained contested, as did the genuine democratic transformation of these countries' domestic politics. The limitations analyzed above still hampered the EU's efforts to exert influence, even if some semi-authoritarian systems had opened up.

Theoretical Expectations about the Role of Europarties

Domestic politics and the absence of the enlargement 'carrot' (at least for the foreseeable future) are the two crucial parameters that, through their interaction, condition the pathways of EU influence over its neighbourhood (Ademmer and Börzel, 2013, pp. 582; Youngs, 2009). Vachudova's argument for the Western Balkans holds for the EaP as well: 'Political parties are arguably the most important and most proximate source of domestic policy change – and thus of compliance or non-compliance with EU requirements' (Vachudova, 2014, p. 128). Given the challenges the EU faces in the EaP and the multifaceted nature of Europarties, I argue that Europarties can have equivalent multifaceted effects in their external activities and hence contribute to overall EU goals in the region at times of intense contestation inside some EaP states over their geostrategic orientation and the reform of their political system.

These external activities are informed by the Europarties' needs and ambitions as actors of the EU political system and transnational actors of European politics. Europarties want to be in a position where they can maximise their influence in the EU political system. One way to achieve this is to sustain affiliation with strong parties beyond the EU, thus enhancing their clout within the EU political system. Europarties formally employ strict criteria that approximate the EU's normative agenda (respect for democracy and rule of law, fight against corruption etc.) for accepting new associated members. In this way, they act as *sub-contractors* of EU conditionality towards political elites of EaP states. But they also function under the pressure to increase their own relevance. Europarties balance in their calculations the imperatives of ideological consistency and relevance. Given that in EaP, ideological parties are weak, usually the available strong parties on the ground are driven by oligarchic agendas. Responding to their own needs and ambitions, Europarties

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[6] Bader (2010, pp. 75–107) provides a helpful summary of the relevant literature.

are induced to accept such parties, even when their programmatic and organisational reforms are not completed.

Europarties' multifaceted functions mirror the different ways the EU influences states, elites and societies in EaP: as Europarties support parties that campaign and engage with citizens in their countries, mass party politics becomes an avenue for the EU to influence societies beyond its reach – the *linkage* effect of EU foreign policy, which analytically has mostly been researched at the level of NGOs, civil society engagement etc. (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011, pp. 890–892). When partisan leaders from the EaP are also heads of government or members of cabinets, Europarties can offer unique opportunities to bring together political leaders in a context of ideological like-mindedness and form an arena where EU policies can be promoted on the elite level next to normal diplomatic channels (see, for example, EPP, 2015). Europarties may offer support and an outlet for expression in Brussels and on a pan-European level to pro-European politicians from EaP states. Helping pro-European parties survive and remaining associated with them when they lose power means that Europarties can sustain an additional avenue of communication and EU influence in EaP countries. Europarties are extremely valuable for affiliated politicians in EaP states and this should in return allow Europarties to influence and exert leverage over these politicians.

Europarty involvement in EaP states can contribute to the projection of templates of *normal* party politics – such as party politics that is ideologically coherent, patterned and predictable (Von dem Berge and Poguntke, 2013). The establishment of party politics *in Europe's image* can be seen as a way to promote ideological, consistent and democratically accountable politics in EaP countries. At the same time, this can contribute to the pursuit of the EU's preferred nexus of mutually intertwined strategic and normative interests as well. As Youngs (2004, p. 425) analyzed, quoting Geoffrey Pridham, the EU insisted that government coalitions in Slovakia and Romania in the pre-accession period include more parties than necessary. This was an externalisation of the pervasive (at least in western Europe) norm of consensus politics that was seen as the best way for inclusion of minorities, but at the same time it corresponded to the EU's interest in having stable governments in its (then) neighbourhood. Thus, *normal* party politics in the EaP is a normative goal for the EU, but just like other normative goals it does not come without strategic undertones as well.

In sum, the involvement by Europarties as transnational actors seeking to increase their influence inside and beyond the EU can contribute both to the promotion of strategic interests of the EU and to external adaptation to European norms. Even though the EU cannot promise accession to EaP countries (which deprives it of the capacity to offer rewards to self-interested actors), Europarties should be expected to offer smaller-scale enticements (association with European leaders, access to EU policy-making circles, ideological credibility of programmatic commitments etc.) to politicians in exchange for implementing reforms in the way they run their parties and their countries. Europarties can act as levers of pressure on eastern European elites on behalf of the EU (for example, by forcing affiliated parties to make 'European orientation' a core component of their programmatic outlook (Klápačová, 2013)),[7] because political leaders in the EaP value the

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[7] This line of thinking reproduces Vachudova's (2014) argument about political parties in Western Balkan states accepting and promoting European norms because their leaders expect to reap specific benefits from association with the EU.

prospect of remaining associated with Europarties. Through the effect on their affiliated parties, Europarties will be able to contribute to the establishment of more European-like party politics in eastern Europe – a subset of the EU's normative goals and an important feature of European governance. Finally, by contributing to the advocacy and campaign work of partner parties, Europarties assist in the socialisation of (parts of) EaP societies to European democratic values, thus contributing to societal linkage as well.

Scope Conditions of the Argument

As mentioned earlier, transnational relations literature has pointed to the importance of specific domestic conditions for the impact of transnational actors. These conditions can be both institutional (domestic state structure) (Risse-Kappen, 1995) and ideational – for instance, the prior attachment of domestic actors to ideas or identities allowing concurrent norms to be effective (Cortell and Davis, 2000; Evangelista, 1999). The external governance literature on the other hand has long acknowledged the importance of conducive political conditions for European norms and governance templates to effectively penetrate neighbouring states and their institutions (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Youngs, 2009, p. 896). 'The functioning of [transgovernmental networks and functional co-operation] presupposes a certain degree of *preferential fit* in the neighbourhood' (emphasis added), and '[t]he respective governmental actors need to consider the EU as provider of legitimate and effective solutions before they decide to engage in these networks […]' (Ademmer and Börzel, 2013, pp. 584, 585).

Based on these theoretical considerations, I identify two scope conditions for my argument: First, the political arena in an EaP state must not be full-blown autocratic; there must exist at least the potential of government turnaround through elections (*institutional scope condition*). Since the main effect of Europarties is on and via their affiliated parties, it is important that they function in a system that allows competitive party politics. Second, once the political arena in an EaP state is open, the political views and preferences of a substantial part of the political elite has to resonate for whatever reason (sincere values-based attachment or instrumental calculations, viewing the EU as a source of problem-solving policies or even an arena for self-promotion) with European values, norms and interests (*ideational scope condition*).[8] Given both the top-down character of party politics in EaP states, and Russia's capacity to exert material and normative influence in these countries (Ademmer and Börzel, 2013, p. 603), the pre-existing willingness of parts of elites to associate themselves with Europe is important for Europarties to find openings for influence.

3. Europarties in EaP: Moldova and Georgia

The empirical analysis that follows will focus on how Europarty involvement in two EaP countries, Georgia and Moldova, underpinned the EU's effort to engage these countries strategically (by creating and fostering additional channels of leverage and influence on pro-European elites). It will also gauge how Europarties promoted an aspect of European democratic governance (specific templates and standards of normal politics)

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[8] For a theoretical discussion of the strategic use of the EU's image and associated norms and ideas by national actors see Woll and Jacquot (2010).

by offering political support and guidance to associated political parties. The analysis will be based on analysis of secondary sources and insights from interviews and discussions with officials of the three major Europarties and affiliated organisations, enhanced by observations of the author while working for a European political foundation in 2010.

The argument of this article applies to the external activities of the three major Europarties: the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE Party).[9] These Europarties have a significant amount of organisational maturity inside and institutionalised reach (links with affiliated parties) beyond the EU. Also, as *pro-regime parties* of the EU political system, they are in broad agreement (despite differences of emphasis) with the EU goals in eastern Europe, as well as with the idea of an effective common EU foreign policy as such (Chryssogelos, 2015). The combination of these two criteria forces us to exclude from the analysis pro-EU party families that have very little external reach like the Greens and Eurosceptic party families of the far right and far left that lack formal organisation and homogeneity on the EU level, have little interest in contributing to EU foreign policy as currently constituted, and have almost non-existent institutionalised and consistent reach beyond EU borders.

Case selection is informed by the theoretical delimitation of the scope of this argument. Of the six EaP states, two (Azerbaijan and Belarus) are authoritarian and do not have functioning party politics. One state (Armenia) portrays all the features of semi-authoritarian post-Soviet politics as analyzed above (parties as instruments of oligarchic interests, lack of ideological referents, excessive volatility etc.). The remaining three states experienced democratic revolutions that halted the process of authoritarisation of their polities: the Orange Revolution in 2004 in Ukraine, the Rose Revolution in 2003 in Georgia, and the Twitter Revolution in 2009 in Moldova. Of those three countries, Ukraine has a vibrant political life, but only one major European party family, the centre-right EPP, has been engaged with major parties there (Timuş, 2014).

Moldova and Georgia are more interesting for comparative purposes. In one case (Moldova) all three major Europarties (EPP, PES and ALDE) have supported parties belonging to the same pro-European coalition against the heirs of the regime of Vladimir Voronin that was toppled in 2009. In the other case (Georgia) the Europarties have found themselves supporting opposing sides of the main political divide between the leader of the Rose Revolution, Mikhail Saakashvili, and his successor (since 2012), billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. As will be seen, the first constellation calls upon Europarties to underpin the strategic interests of the EU in Moldova (that is, to support and foster a multi-party pro-European coalition), while the second constellation allows Europarties to assist in the institutionalisation of more stable party system dynamics in Georgia.

Moldova

Europarty involvement in Moldova increased substantially when the electoral-democratic arena opened and the country's pro-European orientation became a key stake of domestic politics after the Twitter Revolution of 2009 that ousted semi-authoritarian ruler Vladimir Voronin of the Communist Party (PCRM). Before then, Europarties were associated with

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[9] ALDE Party refers to the Europarty of the liberal party family; the EP group of the liberals is called ALDE Group. For brevity, I will use 'ALDE' in this article to refer to the Europarty.

weak and ideological parties. With the emergence of new parties supported by oligarchic interests, but carrying (supposedly) pro-European attitudes, Europarties saw an opportunity to increase their presence in Moldova. The EU's strategic/political and normative influence increased accordingly. Europarties became an important avenue for the support of the EU's strategic goal of pulling Moldova in a European direction by advising pro-European parties to remain allied despite their shaky relations.[10]

The penetration of the Moldovan party scene by Europarties mirrored their twin pursuit of normative and interest-based goals – to extend their footprint while finding strong partners. In so doing, they shadowed the EU's wider goals in the country – strategic and normative. The case of the EPP is quite revelatory: it severed its relations with a small ideological associate party after it allied with Voronin and broke ranks with the pro-European coalition. In 2011 the EPP accepted in its ranks (as observer) the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM) of Vlad Filat, after Filat had become Prime Minister and after PLDM had arisen as the main force of the pro-European coalition over three successive elections in 2009–10 (EPP, 2011).

Filat himself had started his career in the Democratic Party (PDM), a socialist party that had existed as a label in the 1990s and had disappeared before it was taken over by another oligarch, Anton Lupu, who in turn had defected from PCRM. Much like PLDM, PDM's power increased in 2009 and 2010 and this convinced the European Socialists to accept it as an observer shortly before the November 2010 elections (PES, 2010). Consistent with its tradition of associating with more ideological actors, ALDE also accepted into its fold the Liberal Party (PL) – probably the most ideological of the three pro-European parties (Wilson, 2013) – after it had arisen as the major force of pro-European mobilisation. For all Europarties their choice of associates in Moldova was consistent with their preference for strong partners, who in turn became embedded in networks that offered not just privileges but also obligations and receptivity to influence from the EU. This had to do especially with questions of electoral strategy.

A pro-European coalition of PLDM, PDM and PL replaced PCRM in power after 2009 and remained in power through repeated elections, scandals, rival personal agendas between Filat and Lupu, competition for the control of the state apparatus (Calus, 2013), and convoluted and shifting moves in parliament. Europarties played a dual role: on the one hand, they offered declaratory support to their associated members (EPP, 2013a), which strengthened these parties' credentials as pro-EU actors in Moldova and in Brussels. On the other hand, Europarties were a powerful conveyor belt for the EU's key strategic interest in Moldova: to have a pro-European government in Chisinau. The Europarties applied significant pressure on their associates to maintain and support the pro-European coalition (ALDE Party, 2013a; EPP, 2013b). In the case of ALDE, PL was urged to do so even after it had disagreed with the other two parties and had exited the government in 2013 (ALDE Party, 2013b).

The elections of 2014 reaffirmed the resilience of the partisan identities of the associates of the three main Europarties, as well as their collaboration (as they maintained the majority as a pro-European coalition). Considered as a 'success story' of the EaP, Moldova's pro-European course was very important for the credibility of EU foreign

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[10] Observations of the author while working for a European political foundation, May–November 2010, Brussels; interview with ALDE official, 25 July 2013.

and neighbourhood policy (especially at times of heightened tension in Ukraine) (Parmentier, 2014). The Europarties assisted in the electoral campaign of their associates with statements, campaigning and expertise (EPP, 2014; PES, 2014; *Teleradio Moldova*, 2014). Of course all three Europarties strongly urged their partners to form a pro-European government after the election (ALDE Party, 2015). In this way, the Europarty activities of electoral and political assistance underpinned the EU's main strategic goal in Moldova. At the same time, the relative stability of the electoral strength and corporate identity of Europarty-associated parties in Moldova was one signal (however pale) of closer approximation of the patterns of mass politics in Moldova to European standards.

Georgia

In Georgia the main factor that conditioned the involvement of Europarties was the typically post-Soviet pattern of one government party dominating many small and inept opposition parties. PES and ALDE had been associated over the years with various such parties. Unlike Moldova, the dominant pattern did not break even after the 2003 Rose Revolution that ousted Edvard Shevardnadze. His party was duly eradicated, only to be replaced by the United National Movement (UNM) of new President Mikhail Saakashvili, himself a defector of the Shevardnadze regime.

Initially UNM had approached ALDE, but Saakashvili's foreign policy priorities changed his party calculations as well. As he increased his anti-Russian rhetoric, he came closer to the positions of the EPP, the most Atlanticist and anti-Putin party family. His posturing during the war with Russia in summer 2008 further contributed to his rapprochement with the EPP – particularly with right-wing parties from CEE. The UNM joined the EPP as observer in September of that year. From Saakashvili's perspective, this choice was meant to be a strong signal of his foreign policy orientation, as well as a way to find a strong partner and channel of communication in Brussels. From the EPP's perspective, this was an opportunity to take into the fold a strong governing party in an EaP state with big overlaps in terms of ideology and, particularly, foreign policy views.[11] In so doing the EPP also underpinned the EU's strategic goal of extending its influence in Georgia by accepting in its network a politician with expressed pro-Western aspirations for Georgia.[12]

The second wave of Europarty involvement in Georgia came after billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili entered the fray as challenger to Saakashvili in late 2011. His Georgian Dream coalition (built around his Georgian Dream party) included, among others, two ALDE-associated parties, the Republicans and the Free Democrats. Georgian Dream won the parliamentary elections in October 2012 and the presidential elections of early 2013, completing the first peaceful transfer of power in the post-Soviet world. That victory was celebrated by PES and ALDE (PES, 2012; Watson, 2012). The latter was particularly supportive of Georgian Dream in Brussels (ALDE Party, 2012a), and it

[11] Interview with EPP official, 18 July 2013, Brussels.
[12] Saakashvili had the goal of Georgia joining both the EU and NATO. This was not in the immediate offing by either organisation, and was a source of complications to the extent that the EU did not want to antagonise Russia directly. Still, Saakashvili's pro-European orientation formed a substantially different environment for the exertion of EU's strategic and normative influence in Georgia than in the past.

relished Saakashvili's defeat in the parliamentary elections of October 2012 and the peaceful transfer of power (ALDE Party, 2012b).

For PES and ALDE the elections of 2012–13 were an opportunity to support what they saw as an anti-authoritarian opposition (in repeat of the same cycle as in 2003). While ALDE's partners in Georgia were (as is usually the case with liberals) small parties, PES saw an opportunity to find a new strong partner, the Georgian Dream party. Portraying a good understanding of the role of transnational political affiliations, Ivanishvili had pursued association with PES and PES itself was receptive to the idea (*EurActiv*, 2012). But the situation was complicated by the fact that the outgoing leader had pro-EU credentials and the strong support of the biggest Europarty, the EPP.

The involvement of Europarties is, quite uncharacteristically, highly salient in domestic public discourse in Georgia. The EPP supported Saakashvili's view that the prosecutions against UNM politicians initiated by the new government constituted selective justice, which in turn halted the rapprochement between Georgian Dream and PES.[13] Saakashvili's criticism also contained a foreign policy dimension, in that he charged Ivanishvili with wanting to move Georgia closer to Russia (Nilsson, 2013) – an accusation that was close to many EPP parties' sensibilities. When 23 EPP MEPs publicly castigated Ivanishvili for the state of democracy in Georgia (*EurActiv*, 2013), Ivanishvili replied by writing an open letter to the EPP and its members explaining himself, accusing Saaksashvili and committing himself to Georgia's European course (*Georgian Journal*, 2013). The publication of a negative report by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2014 also caused uproar and was attributed by some to the support of the centre-right to Saakashvili (Tavberidze, 2014). Even though all Europarties shared in theory a common interest in promoting democratic politics in Georgia, they found themselves on opposing sides of a bitter domestic divide.

This constellation has interesting links with the EU's goals in the region. First, for the first time a party that lost power in Georgia shows some potential to survive in opposition. Of course this is more due to Saakashvili's personality and the sense of persecution brought about by the new government's legal actions against UNM members. In this context, EPP membership promises access to international political and moral support that the party will only reap if it maintains some semblance of organisational continuity (EPP, 2013c). The survival of parties out of office, as well as the emergence of competitive patterns between parties associated (formally or loosely) with major European party families (unlike, for example, in Moldova where Europarty associates are allied), would of course be features of more European-like party politics in Georgia.

Second, the polarisation of Georgian politics has allowed Europarties to maintain a stronger check on the policies of Georgian parties. As PES and ALDE's initial enthusiasm about the Ivanishvili government cooled down and fears of selective justice increased, Georgian Dream emphasised its pro-European orientation. Georgian Dream and PES maintained links because PES was always interested in having a strong partner in Georgia. But given Ivanishvili's initial reassurances about keeping Georgia close to Europe, his interest in finding strong international partners as he was fighting it out with

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[13] Discussions with PES and ALDE officials in the first half of 2013, Brussels.

Saakashvili, and the fact that the opposition in Georgia is anyway pro-European (unlike in Moldova), PES could afford to vet Georgian Dream's policies carefully.[14]

Georgia (along with Ukraine and Moldova) deepened its ties with the EU following the Vilnius and Riga EaP Summits in 2013 and 2015 since Georgian Dream came to power, and one can surmise that the contradictory involvement of Europarties (supporting different sides of a bitter polarisation) played an amplifying role for both leverage and attraction of the EU in Georgia. Eventually PES accepted Georgian Dream as observer in June 2015 (with the same decision that elevated Moldova's PDM from observer to associate status) (PES, 2015).

Conclusion

The eastern neighbourhood is the region where the EU has the most ambitious agenda outside of the enlargement zone of the western Balkans. EU norms and interests interact in intricate ways in the Eastern Partnership, particularly after the aspirations of some EaP states and Russia's reactions to them have forced more strategic considerations upon the EU in recent years. The EU has to pursue these goals without the potent tool of enlargement. Without a credible promise of accession, the EU cannot offer to elites of the region benefits that will offset the costs of pushing through the liberalisation and the reform of state structures and the economy.

Europarties obviously cannot be the most consequential actors of EU foreign policy. The limitations of Europarties (as well as of the EaP framework as a whole) in the face of persistent (semi)authoritarian political structures become evident if we think of their limited salience in a country like Armenia, where political elites have been able to maintain a semi-closed political system that has not been challenged by mass protests, or their miniscule presence in political systems that are completely closed and authoritarian, as in Belarus and Azerbaijan. The argument here has been that Europarties become influential after two key preconditions are met: first, the political arena in EaP states opens up and becomes more competitive following popular mobilisation against semi-authoritarian regimes. Second, some of the new political elites that arise during this opening of the political system support a turn of their countries towards the EU. This decision to orientate towards Europe may enjoy broad support (as in Georgia) or be heavily contested (as in Moldova) – in the latter case, Europarty affiliation becomes even more important symbolically as a signal of pro-European orientation in domestic political competition.

Under these preconditions, Europarties play a potentially important role (among various other actors to be sure) in supporting the EU's normative and strategic goals. As demonstrated in the analysis of developments in Georgia and Moldova, Europarties exert leverage over national elites even where there is no enlargement promise from the EU, providing them with personal-political benefits, and therefore incentives to comply with the EU's strategic priorities. In this way, Europarties become transmission belts for EU preferences concerning, for example, the coalition strategies of pro-European parties. At the same time, through their co-operation and support, Europarties help sustain their partners when they leave office or are pressured by their opponents. In this way,

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[14] Discussions with PES and ALDE officials in the first half of 2013, Brussels.

Europarties indirectly support the emergence of more stable and predictable party systems where high volatility and short-lived parties are the rule.

Obviously Europarties are not *the* single most important actor of EU foreign and neighbourhood policy. Their effect has to be seen in tandem with other EU actions and decisions in the region, but even the relatively modest difference they can make (as examined here) is worthy of more analytical attention. Indeed, one can think of various other ways Europarties can support EU foreign and neighbourhood policy, which are also areas of future research. Europarties can also act as sources of information on the political situation on the ground for the EU foreign policy system that is then fed into EU policy-making through ideological-sectoral networks of affiliated EU Commissioners, Eurocrats, MEPs and national politicians.[15] This function is particularly important in a context of more strategic engagement with EaP and perhaps more pronounced competition with Russia in the future. It is also a function that may be crucial even in non-democratic settings (such as Belarus), as Europarty affiliation with political forces there may serve as an avenue of communication between the EU and pro-democratic actors.

External governance promotion still remains the most developed mode of engagement with eastern Europe. Even if it was not part of the empirical analysis in this article, Europarties may also have a role to play here, since they create and sustain networks of middle-ranking politicians, cadres and supporters from the EU and the EaP through party associations (such as youth leagues) or specialised (such as students) meetings. To the extent that various government and bureaucracy positions are filled by partisan actors both in the EU and eastern Europe, Europarties may also play a role similar to that of policy networks most usually studied in the relevant literature on EU external governance promotion (Freyburg *et al.*, 2009, pp. 918–919).

Another aspect of this agenda that future research can look into would be the dynamics of parliamentary settings spanning the EU and the EaP, such as the EURONEST parliamentary assembly, which may provide interesting insights into patterns of elite interaction. Finally, on the side of EaP countries, one could assess comparatively the variables under which various influences of Europarties play out, including the institutional framework of these countries (parliamentary or presidential), the institutional framework of party politics, or the influence of Russia over local elites. More generally, the argument presented in this article can also be seen as a call for stronger attention not just on Europarties but on non-state actors in EU external relations.

The article concludes with a note of caution, which also denotes the conceptual and practical limits of its argument: in theory the opening of electoral arenas and the election of pro-European governments in EaP states should be a major step towards their political and technocratic alignment with the EU. Yet practical experience is not always encouraging. The squabbling between pro-European elites in Georgia and the scandals engulfing the pro-European coalition in Moldova are a reminder that electoral turnover does not equal real political reform. Europarties face some pressing dilemmas. Supporting them in Brussels is an essential carrot for Europarties to apply leverage over EaP political elites. But if these elites receive political coverage even when they break the EU rules, they may feel enabled to continue on the same perilous path.

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[15] Interviews with PES official, 11 July 2013, and EPP official, 18 July 2013, Brussels.

Europarties can significantly enhance both the strategic and the normative paths of EU influence in EaP states, as this article demonstrated. But ultimately they cannot escape the same practical dilemmas along the strategic-normative nexus that the EU faces, nor supplant the importance of political will for real reform to take root in the eastern neighbourhood. In this they are not all too different from the EU as a foreign policy actor. But as the EU is reassessing its relations with the post-Soviet space and recalibrating strategic and normative considerations and tools, Europarties hold the potential of contributing to EU foreign policy in ways that have been very little studied and understood until today.

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