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Reconsidering the role of parties at the European Level: constructing actorness for the Christian Democrat and Socialist party groups in the European Parliament using an international relations framework

This paper argues that parties at European level have, as mandated by Article 191 of the TEU, accumulatively acquired actor capabilities at an international level. I conduct the investigation by looking at the two *familles spirituelles* in the EP, namely the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats and assessing how they seek to achieve this within a regional perspective, i.e. the Mediterranean. The thrust behind the argument is that Groups, beyond their legislative capacity, engage in interactions with actors beyond EU borders enhancing their international profile as a result, and increasing their political legitimacy in the EU and international domain. I contend that shedding light on the political process reveals the dynamics of how actorness is constructed. This is set against a liberal IR backdrop wherein party groups are considered non-state actors. The investigation underlines the normative implications of the Groups' political choices and their nuanced engagement (such as the role of religion) with actors in the region. I suggest that these observations help us view party groups from a different lens.

Introduction

Political parties play a very important part in world politics¹ yet they have received little attention as to what their role in international relations is. So much has evolved since Marquand (1978, 445) stated that only a '*Europe des parties*' could bring about a '*Europe des peuples*.' At the time, it was retained that such a Europe existed 'only in embryo,' the first direct elections to the European Parliament (EP) were still to be held, and the notion of curtailing intergovernmental competence was still a remote possibility. Since then, the literature has surged (Hix et. al 2003) and our knowledge on parties at the European level soared. Despite this, some lacunas, such as the extra-parliamentary behaviour of party groups still exist. An investigation of this phenomenon shows that the literature available contrasts quite starkly with the perceptions from the field. In this article I aim to address this incongruence by shedding light on the Mediterranean politics of the two party families and what does this imply on the international relations (IR) of the EU.

¹ Wilfried Martens claims that 'few things are possible without political parties' (2006, 5).

The idea of the EU becoming an international actor has been gaining ground in recent years despite the early scepticism (e.g. Bull, 1982)² that this came across, the inability to speak with one voice and to effectively wield its power (Peterson 2001). This lack of confidence would therefore be easily transmitted to the various components that make up the EU, rendering the idea of European parties in the international arena as rather improbable.³ Party literature has not added their international vocation either. For example LaPalombara and Weiner (1966, v) had judiciously noted that, ‘in the tradition of political science it has been conventional to see political parties and party systems primarily in terms of their representative functions.’ Though literature has evolved and expanded since then, it is still lacking⁴ when it comes to party behaviour beyond national borders. As Lawson (2002, 132) argues, ‘we need to observe parties .. in action at the global level.’

The debate is here narrowed to the concept of actorness. The focus is concentrated on how parliamentary coalitions in the EP develop the capability to acquire significance beyond the chambers of parliament and what does this tell to the IR debate. The challenge is mostly conceptual. Political parties have not been considered as relevant forces in a realm which is dominated by the state. Secondly, parties at the European level are three tier structures⁵ and the division of labour is necessary given the distinction between form and content at each level.⁶ Thirdly, what footing can transnational party groups have in the international relations of the EU? Mair (2005, 165) contends that literature on European parties is starting to show a ‘growing concern with the impact of European politics on party politics and political representation at the national level’ i.e. their influence beyond the boundaries of the EP.

I aim to spell out this more clearly by organizing this article as follows. In the first section I propose a conceptual framework, examine some legal perspectives, propose an IR paradigm and explain why qualitative methods were used to conduct the investigation. Then I detail the findings, and make an evaluation of actorness according to my observations. Finally I make some reflections and draw the main conclusions.

² Hedley Bull (1982, 151) renowned *English School* scholar, had slammed the idea of an EU as an international actor: ‘Europe is not an actor in international affairs, and does not seem likely to become one.’ Though he asserted that the primacy of the state system would be assured, Bull (2002, 271:272) noted that there are cases where transnational relationships ‘assume an important place’ in the politics of the EEC.

³ Ernst Kuper (2006, 65) refers to the role of transnational party relations on foreign policy as one of a ‘dubious nature.’

⁴ Most of the theory on political parties has been based on territoriality (van Houten, 2009).

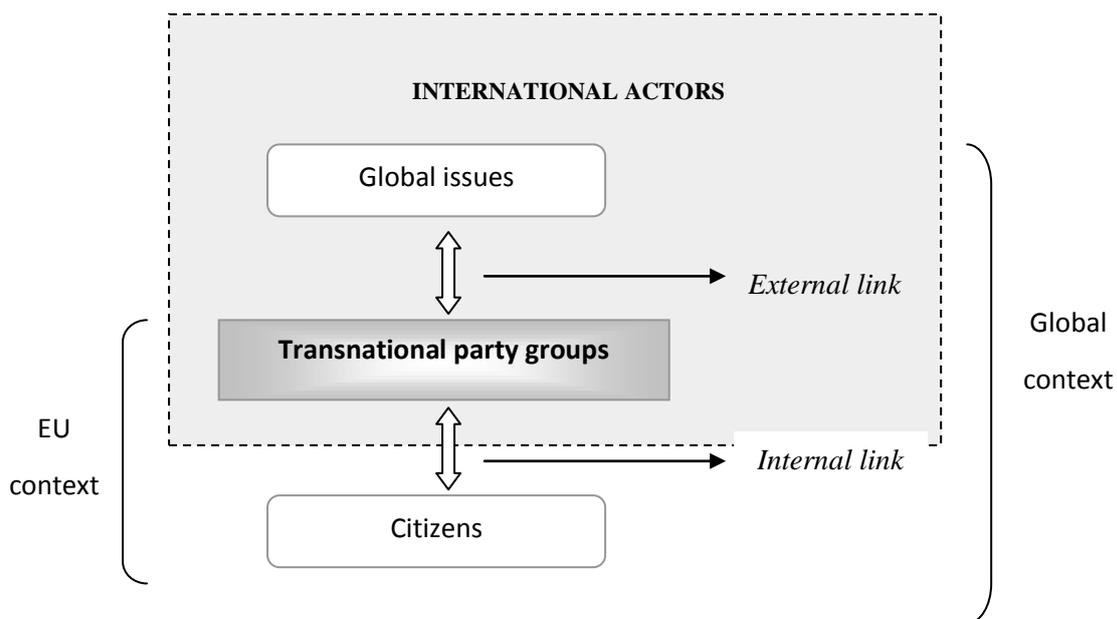
⁵ The relationship between national parties, EP groups and party federations is best described as a triangular co-operation (Pridham and Pridham 1981, Hix 1996, Ladrech 1996:294, Johansson 1997:59, Raunio 2000:245).

⁶ While the European party and party groups are ‘naturally closely linked’ (see Tsatos Report, 1996), they have different functional duties (Attinà 1998, 25) and are ‘by no means the same animal’ (Hanley 2006, 38).

Conceptual framework

My understanding of IR⁷ is that it is a system that allows interactions between *any* actor that has the capacity to vie for political influence. Warleigh (2006, 34) argues that an IR investigation would involve ‘the study of both formal and informal practices, processes and actors, and has the scope to investigate both state and non-state actors.’ The scenario envisaged by this research is insufficiently explained by existing IR theories. Supranational theory describes the ‘ability to override the authority of the state and produce policies which entail a diminution of state sovereignty’ (Little and Smith 1998, 6) while intergovernmental theory describes organizations that ‘are merely instruments of governments’ (Keohane and Nye 1974, 39). Neofunctionalism also poses some limitations as to what area of politics is being studied since it fails to account for ‘high politics’ such as international affairs (Hix 1994, 5). The selection of an IR model to study parties at the European level requires a framework that holds their international dimension into account. The schematic below is an attempt to advance such a framework, taking note of the political dimension within which party groups are being observed.

Figure 1: Contextual environment of transnational party groups



⁷ I shall abide by Holsti's (1995, 18-19) definition of *IR* as a term referring 'to all forms of interaction between members of separate societies, whether government-sponsored or not' as distinct to *international politics* that generally refers to the 'processes of interaction between two or more states.'

Any configuration of political parties is to take stock of their linkage⁸ with the environment. I divide the links⁹ of transnational party groups into two; the internal link with EU actors (policies and citizens which elected them), and the external link with international actors representing the wider and global engagement of the EU. The latter (shaded area in figure 1) corresponds to our area of interest manifested by the parliamentary arm of European parties. The connection between political parties and citizens is by default the most important linkage, but linkage with the external environment is a concept we could have in place once a European polity is created. Sabella (2006) makes the case as follows:

‘In many countries parliamentarians see themselves as individual representatives of the people. But for the continuation and the realisation of mid- and long-term policies, structures like political parties are needed. It is important also to form transnational networks based on common convictions.’

The study of foreign affairs often focuses on relations between states and tends to marginalize the importance of non-state actors and their role in governance or policy making. Yet transnational parties are at the forefront of the political debate and while they may not be primary decision makers, they actively seek to stir the debate and influence ideas. After all, as Johansson (1997, 45) argues that ‘they have a unique access to the corridors of power and should therefore be distinguished from other types of transnational actors.’ With the myriad factors (and actors) that contribute to EU policy, it would be opportune to assess how transnational parties can be understood as actors participating in the international relations of the EU seeking to shape the agenda (see Hix and Lord 1997, Hix 2002a).

The purpose here is not to dismiss the centrality of a state-centred approach towards the international system, but to take a closer look at how political parties utilize their political clout, resource capacities and organizational skills to engage in *international* action. The study of political parties at the European level is closely intertwined with the development and expansion of European Union (EU) policy, so, transnational party activity becomes part of the international dimension of the EU. However any suggestion of participation in foreign policy cannot dismiss the parameters that define their official role in the external relations of the EU. I broach this part of the coin in the following section.

⁸ Pedersen (1996, 26) calls political parties ‘linkage organizations,’ and Johansson (2004, 25) terms ‘transnationalism as the theory of linkage politics.’

⁹ The ‘linkage’ is essentially the concept of ‘relations’ explained by Sonderrmann (1961, 10). The link is between two components ‘contacts, connections or associations’ and ‘action-reaction.’ In a pluralist scenario, political parties are vehicles for the politicization of issues in different arenas, hence perfect examples for the provision of multi-level linkages (Johansson 1998, 31).

Legal Perspectives

An assessment of the legal standing of parties at the European level can be made from two different angles. The first would be to assess their position in terms of international law and the legitimacy that allows them to interact with other institutions or states (recognition is in fact a key attribute of actorness as I discuss later on). This consideration is essential in a period where the locus of control is no longer at the hands of the state only. In addition ‘the influence of non-state actors in this globalized world is unquestionably stronger than at any point since the Westphalia system was established’ (Schwartz 2008, 1). Legitimacy is about ‘obtaining permission for acting’ an acquiescence that comes through accepted norms and methods (see Vedder 2003, 7). We are to assume that a non-state actor that does not comply with such norms would not be granted the legitimacy to act and will therefore remain irrelevant in terms of successfully interacting with other actors.

The second legal consideration is the parameters allowed to the EP in terms of the EU’s external relations. Up to now, foreign policy remains largely the prerogative of national parliaments, although the Commission and the Council are influential in forging international agreements. However the EP is in most cases presented with a ‘*fait accompli*’ where negotiations are undertaken behind closed doors (Thym 2008, 209).¹⁰ The EP’s role has been limited to consultation and information (Cameron 2001, 65), scrutiny of the executive and approval of the budget (Annan 2005, 2). Unlike other areas where the EP¹¹ has gained significant powers (for e.g. it has to give its assent to any enlargements), its role in CFSP¹² has not changed – possibly a reason why ‘the EP’s role in CFSP has not been a major area of academic research’ (Diedrichs 2004, 31).¹³ A research on party groups through their institutional capacity as actors in the EP is destined to face these limitations.

Who really represents the EU abroad? (see Cameron 2001, 59) What I contend is that this question cannot be correctly (as it conventionally is) answered by simply looking at the

¹⁰ Literature widely acknowledges that in foreign policy, the democratic accountability in the form of parliamentary control is weak (Crowe et al. 2006, 265). In EU terms this mostly been referred to as the ‘democratic-deficit’ (Hill 2003, 38).

¹¹ Formal powers of EP set by article 21 of the Treaty of Maastricht (1992). Refer to EP Rules of Procedure for provisions on EP’s role in CFSP (RP, Rule 89).

¹² The CFSP budget still amounts to only 3.5% of the EC’s overall budget for external action (Thym 2008, 224).

¹³ According to Thym (2008, 221), the EP’s exclusions from having additional rights in this area was a ‘deliberate choice of various IGCs which have consciously refrained from extending parliamentary oversight.’

different powers that the institutions¹⁴ are granted to make representations. Shifting the attention to the contribution of party groups departs from this legal limitation but as I suggest shortly, a reconsideration is more likely if we look at them from an IR lens.

IR paradigm

Epistemologically, an IR framework seems better poised to view transnational processes as a series of consequences of relations between various actors. Some have argued that the interaction between IR and comparative politics (domestic) is inevitable to grant a clear explanation (Caporaso 1997, Risse-Kappen 1994, 1996). Opting for an IR paradigm is motivated by two main reasons: i) the necessity to view parties as part of a dynamic international system that comprises other actors besides the state, and ii) investigating patterns of behaviour where competition is less evident.¹⁵ An IR investigation is an opportunity to observe not only *how* party groups express themselves on international affairs but also *why*.

According to Scharpf (2000, 1), the conceptual tools with which IR and comparative politics ‘are approaching the study of European institutions are ill suited to deal with multilevel interactions.’ So it is clear that not only our empirical knowledge is restricted, we may suffer theoretical inadequacy as well due to the concern of how to locate transnational parties in the analytical framework. Rosenau (1980, 84) suggests that they be included as ‘units which engage in activities that span national boundaries and contribute to the formation or maintenance of issues on the global agenda.’ I propose that party groups be considered as non-state actors (see Josselin and Wallace, 2001) that engage in extensive networking¹⁶ to play an important role in global politics.¹⁷

¹⁴ Although as Judge and Earnshaw (2003, 188) argue, party groups ‘cannot be understood in isolation from the institutional context in which they have developed and within which they function.’

¹⁵ There have been very few attempts in literature. For example Viola (2001) conducts a study on EP party in foreign policy. Viola conducts an analysis of party groups’ behaviour in the EP on the Gulf (1990) and Yugoslav crises (1991). The study makes an assessment of parliamentary debates, committee actions and party resolutions to describe the three stages of both crises: pre-war, war and post-war, listing the roll-call votes (RCVs) taken and the party groups’ positions at each stage. The study is significant in terms of bringing out ideological cleavages on major international events such as war.

¹⁶ For example European party summits have now taken a regular standing ‘bringing together heads of government, national party leaders, chairpersons of the European parliamentary party and Commissioners from that particular party’ (Hayward 1995, 61). This is considered to be one of the most important functions of transnational party activity, the ‘epitome of networking’ (Hix and Lord 1997). Holding these meetings (that bring together party leaders holding the office of Prime Minister) on the eve of the bi-annual meetings of the European Councils is a clear effort to try ‘to shape the agenda of the Council meeting’ (Hix 2002, 282).

¹⁷ They seek to maximize their impact through the interaction with other actors in the international system, actors that ‘negotiate the relationship between individuals, events, and life world’ (Fernandes 2005, 3).

The theoretical framework largely depends on the interpretation¹⁸ of the role of party groups¹⁹ in an international context. In discussing the importance of the EU as an international actor,²⁰ Wessels (2004, 10) argues that in times of interdependence and globalisation, ‘political actors cannot rely any longer only on the nation state, but will have to seek transnational and supranational institutions to be able to address political challenges.’ Liberalism²¹ as an IR approach becomes an alternative path to study party group behaviour in international politics. As Panke & Risse (2006, 92) observe ‘actor-centred liberal theories analyse interest and ideational constellations of domestic groups and the processes through which they influence substantial policy interests of national decision-makers.’

I now turn to the framework adopted to evaluate actorness. As Sjöstedt claims, a ‘structural requirement for *international actor capability* is the existence of commonly accepted goals, along with a system for mobilizing resources necessary to meet the goals’ (Smith 2003, 9). The concept of *political actor* ‘implies observable *action* that is *purposive* and sufficiently *unified*’ (Page 1996, 20) and being ‘capable of formulating purposes and making decisions’ (Bretherton and Vogler 1999, 20). As Attiná (1998, 23) argued, I shall consider that ‘at all levels political parties are actors in the political process’ where actorness refers to the extra-parliamentary behaviour of party groups.

According to Bretherton and Vogler (1999, 1) the debate on actorness ‘concerns the extent to which actors have volition.’ In their view ‘actorness cannot be understood entirely through the study of the behaviour of the entity in question. It is constructed through the interplay of internal political factors and perceptions and expectations of outsiders.’ The underlying principle is that you can only be an actor if the other is ready to accept and recognize you. Self-declared actorness is not enough. Two frameworks of analysis can assist in this regard. White (2001, 39:40) dissects foreign policy into six inter-related elements: actors; processes; issues; instruments; context and outputs. On the other hand Bretherton and Vogler (1999)

¹⁸ In advocating political parties as producers of difference, Fernandes (2005, 1) regards them as ‘institutions that have the power to create a specific vision of the world through the manipulation and influence in some of the prerogatives in which the social world is narrated.’ The international aspect of transnational parties is reflected in the way they respond to changes in the political environment.

¹⁹ I don’t contend that Party groups as non-state actors seek to encroach or undermine the power of the state.

²⁰ For studies of the EU as an international actor see Hill & Smith 2005, Bretherton & Vogler 1999, Smith 2003, Van Reisen 2001 and White 2001. Kratochvíl et. al (2008) argue that how the EU is framed as an international actor in the media has been omitted up to now. In all accounts there is practically no to the contribution of parties at the European level if not for the marginal responsibility in the EP.

²¹ Viotti and Kauppi (1999) hold that one of the key assumptions for a pluralist view of IR, is that non-state actors are important entities in world politics enjoying relative freedom to set the agenda. According to this view transnational organizations play an increasingly important role in global civil society.

propose to understand the EU's external role by synthesizing actorness into three categories: presence; opportunity and capability.

Research Method

I carry out an investigation and perform an analysis that is 'actor-oriented' throwing the focus on the capacities, motivations, objectives and methods utilized by the actors to achieve their objectives. I take the Mediterranean as the regional context where transnational party group behaviour is studied. There are several factors which have motivated this choice. First, the region has been prioritized by the EU in the context of North-South relations that encourage regional cooperation (Smith 2003, 203). Secondly, the Mediterranean is an intersection of geographical, political, religious and cultural divides constantly urging the attention of political players on both sides of the basin.²² As Marsh and Mackenstein (2005, 184) suggest, the 'easiest way' to look at Mediterranean partners is to group²³ them according to how they 'are linked to the EU.' For the purposes of this study, I adopt an issue based approach and study relations on the basis of the most salient issues in the region.²⁴

The methodology relies on two main qualitative tools: (i) document analysis; and (ii) interviews.²⁵ Up to now a vast literature has relied on quantitative methods such as the use roll-call votes (RCVs).²⁶ The Christian Democrats (EPP) and Socialist Groups (PSE) in the EP have shared consensus in many matters in the EP²⁷ and as Raunio (2000, 246) argues 'the relations between the two mammoth groups are still based on co-operation²⁸ rather than on conflict,' a notion that suggests that it is highly unlikely to study approaches to foreign policy through RCVs. My argument is that RCVs do not adequately provide explanations for the scope of this research, hence the reliance on qualitative research.

²² Despite the geographical proximity, EC/EU interest in the region has been fluctuating (Bicchi 2002, 3).

²³ The Mediterranean countries (especially Maghreb countries) had been identified by the European Council as one of the geographical regions for the implementation of joint action (Buchan 1993, 46-47).

²⁴ Other initiatives at an international level include talks with other national parties from aspiring member states (Croatia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine) to active involvement in policies at an international level (for e.g. climate change). Both examples however, do not fall under the EU's foreign affairs remit.

²⁵ Semi-structured interviews with MEPs and advisors on Euro-Mediterranean relations.

²⁶ RCVs represent only a small fraction of EP votes (only 15%). In addition, RCVs are employed selectively by party groups according to the interpretation the vote is intended to give (Carruba et. al 2004, 2006, Hix 2008). In addition Han (2007, 480) argues that RCVs are 'not very informative for estimation.' This is because first, they 'contain comparatively large numbers of missing observations' due to 'MEPs' high absenteeism' and second, they 'include relatively more random-appearing roll calls.'

²⁷ According to Scully (2010, 169), the two main blocs (centre-right and centre-left) cooperated in sharing out most of the senior posts in the EP.

²⁸ According to Garner (2010), the way the two big political families, Christian Democrats and Socialists, 'club and caucus together in doling out eurocrat jobs' is often underestimated. Extracted on 16th March from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/bafc18f2-3126-11df-8e6f-00144feabdc0.html>

Investigation

The investigation accounts for the political initiatives taken prior to the election of the European Parliament in June 2009.²⁹ For both groups,³⁰ the study has been identical. Each party group is assessed through its vision, policy proposals, the organization of conferences and delegations to meet other actors. While conducting the interviews, comparisons between the federations (most of the time referred to as ‘the party’³¹ by interviewees) and the party groups (usually referred to as ‘the group’) were frequently made. It was stressed that ‘they are completely different’³² and that ‘now the group influences the party.’³³ My aim is to discover how actorness can be identified through a regional study, taking Wunderlich’s (2008, 1) view that ‘European regionalism offers some interesting possibilities for the study of actorness.’ In this study I focus on the political initiatives that are taken on three main themes: (i) the Middle-East peace process; (ii) democracy and the rule of law; and (iii) the role of religion. Whereas they are not a holistic perspective of Euro-Mediterranean issues, a discussion of it cannot omit reference to any one of them.

Socialist Group (PSE)

The Socialist Group has been actively organizing and participating in Euro-Mediterranean initiatives through various methods. Of significant importance is the issue of peace in the Middle East, an area to which the group gives considerable weight and attention through the amount of resources and activities dedicated. The policies of the Socialist Group address holistically the whole region urging attention to the social dimension, and a diplomatic approach that is multilateral in nature and inclusive of all actors. According to Wiersma,³⁴ political reform and gradual democratisation are two driving points of the agenda to be pursued in the region (PSE 2006, 23). The construction of dialogue takes place at various levels including alternative methods of interaction, directed by a specialized unit that

²⁹ The election of the European Parliament in June 2009 brought about changes in the alliances of the two main groups: the PSE became the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), while the EPP-ED was regrouped without the European Democrats (British Conservatives) to become the European People’s Party (EPP).

³⁰ From 1999 to 2009, the EPP Group held an alliance with the British Conservatives, European Democrats (ED) an alliance rooted in a common political platform. As Pöttering (2003, 11) argues, the EPP ‘unites the broadest spectrum of centre and centre-right in Europe.’ Fontaine (2009, 35) also brands the EPP as ‘the travelling salesman of Christian Democracy, Moderates and Conservatives in Europe.’

³¹ As commonly called in Brussels corridors. During the investigation it was common occurrence that interviewees refer to the party group in the EP as ‘the group’ and the party federation as ‘the party.’

³² Interview with Joseph Muscat MEP PSE 2004-2008

³³ Interview with Bruno Marasa, Head Mediterranean and Middle East Unit – PSE, 27th April 2009.

³⁴ Jan Marinus Wiersma was Vice-Chairman of the Socialist Group 2004-2009. Interviewed on 29th April 2009.

provides technical support to MEPs and to members of delegations to the Middle East. The initiatives can be categorized as falling into one of the following categories; (i) the organization of Conferences; (ii) delegations to countries; and (iii) meeting sister parties of the Socialist Group from the Mediterranean region.

A team of experts have formed the *Mediterranean and Middle East Unit*, a specialized unit within the Secretariat of the PSE dedicated to research, technical evaluations, paper proposals and the organization of initiatives for the parliamentary group.³⁵ The Unit backs up the demands for resolutions and policy positions which are triggered by the Group and follows up proposals made by the other party groups which concern the region. It conducts the necessary preparations for the parliamentary interventions of PSE MEPs and participates in the party group's delegations to the actors in the region. The Socialist Group maintains that both the Barcelona Process initiated in 1995 and the European Neighbourhood Policy of 2003 failed to yield satisfactory results in the region. It has therefore proposed a new approach to re-launch Euro-Mediterranean relations by presenting key ideas and proposals that revolve around economic, social, cultural, political and institutional dimensions of Euro-Mediterranean relations. Four key ideas are identified: (i) reconfirm Barcelona process but breaking up from security dimension; (ii) stronger support for civil society; (iii) integrate Euro-med area into global economy; and (iv) strengthen cooperation through institutions.

For three consecutive years (2006-2008), the PSE organized a Conference on the Middle East bringing together actors and key players in the region. This is underlined by the driving principle that 'the Middle East crises can be resolved only through dialogue,' and that 'there is no alternative to dialogue and multilateralism for the resolution of international conflicts.' For the Socialist Group, the involvement of all the relevant forces in the dialogue is 'the only viable way forward' (PSE 2006, 5). Napolitano³⁶ claims that the objective of the Conference is for the Socialist Group to show its 'commitment and possibly' its 'contribution to the end of tensions in the Middle East' (PSE 2008a, 9). The aim of these gatherings was to discuss the political situation in the Middle East taking into account the various sensitivities that characterize the region, the cultural and political dimension, and the relations with Muslim countries, where the Socialist Group takes the role of 'facilitator' (PSE 2007:12, 2008:10).

³⁵ Interview with Zoltan Simon, Policy Advisor PSE Group, 7th April 2009.

³⁶ Pasqualina Napolitano MEP was Vice President of the PSE Group 1999-2003.

A recurring principle for the Socialist Group is the *mutual recognition* of all the actors in the region that could influence the peace process. A clear case in point is the involvement of Syria³⁷ to ‘a greater extent than before.’ Mutual recognition becomes an initial step towards ‘confidence-building,’ a step towards which the EU can contribute in a tangible way for the parties to enter into discussions and dialogue (PSE 2006, 9). For example Napolitano calls for the ‘full integration’ of Hezbollah within the Lebanese political and institutional system as the only way stability in the region could be obtained (PSE 2006, 19). In December 2006, a delegation of the PSE Group visited the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, a party which according to Hökmark professes totalitarian Islamism,³⁸ but who is ‘keen in return to engage in dialogue’ with the EU.³⁹

According to the PSE Group, peace efforts should be accentuated by involving all actors without reticence and conditions. Swoboda⁴⁰ urges for the development of a sophisticated strategy which brings ‘ Hamas and Hezbollah to the negotiation table’ and gives them a ‘political role and real responsibility for their people’ (PSE 2006, 40). The role of the nation state in these conflicts is blurred in that organizations with no national recognition yield a strong influence on the nature and outcome of the conflict. The question that is raised is how to deal and negotiate with para-state actors (Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon) who ‘are definitely becoming the main actors in the political conflict’ (Bahout in PSE 2006, 52). Murphy⁴¹ rounds up how the Socialist family could play a role in the region:

“The intervention of the international community as well as the financial and overall support of the European Socialists towards the Palestinian political parties could play a determining role in this context. There are three political institutes, all members of the Socialist International, which work in the Palestinian territories: the Olof Palme Centre, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the National Democratic Institute. The Socialist International, the European Union and this group (Socialist Parliamentary Group) could play an important role to solve the crisis by supporting the democratic parties in Palestine and by offering financial and moral support” (PSE 2008a, 69).

³⁷ To date, out of all the Mediterranean partners of the Euro-Med partnership, only Syria has not signed association agreements (CES 2008bb, 57). This is however conditional on Syria recognizing UN Resolution 1701 that called for the cessation of hostilities and the autonomy and respect for Lebanese borders.

³⁸ Gunnar Hökmark, MEP is Vice-Chairman of the EPP-ED Group. Remarks made during a speech at the Conservative Party Congress given on 26th Feb 2006, extracted on 25th November from

http://www.european-enterprise.org/items/whatwedo/articlesspeeches/Transatlantic_Relations_2010_Bournemouth_Conservative_Conference.pdf

³⁹ EP delegation to Mashreq countries, 19 – 25 Nov 2006, report by Beatrice Patrie, extracted on 25th November from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/afet_06122007_649087/afet_06122007_649087en.pdf

⁴⁰ Hannes Swoboda, MEP is Vice-Chairman of the PSE Group.

⁴¹ Michael Murphy is Resident Country Director in the West Bank and Gaza of the National Democratic Institute for International Relations.

The Socialist Group embarked on a number of delegations to the region to talk directly to the actors. Wiersma (PSE 2006, 24) claims that the success of political initiatives depends on ‘sound and in-depth analyses of the political and social structures in the countries concerned.’ In the missions to Damascus (the delegation was received by President Assad) and Beirut, the delegation of the party group entered into a dialogue with all the parties, emphasizing the necessity to bring them into reconciliation and to encourage them to enter the diplomatic fold with all the parties to bring stability in the region. The Socialist Group stresses that the instrumentalization of religion should be avoided to prevent it from becoming an obstacle to peace. Religion should neither be a qualification nor a disqualification for the participation of politics. A look at the radical expression of fanatics would be superficial and void of the real complexity and variances of the religion. Wiersma notes that in many countries, Islamic political parties are the ‘most important and vocal - and the sometimes even the only opposition movements’ filling in the failures of liberal and socialist opposition in the region.⁴² The political process should therefore leave room for interlocutors with a different conception of religion especially when these are democratic representations of civil society.

Christian Democrats Group (EPP-ED)

According to McMillan-Scott,⁴³ the party group developed ‘close relations with Mediterranean countries based on the concept of regional partnership’ adding the assertion that it was the EPP-ED group that ‘initiated the revitalization of the Barcelona Process.’ The Group prepares and conducts its political work on Euro-Mediterranean relations through its Euro-Med Working Group. This working group establishes a network of contacts depending on the identification of those who share the Group’s ‘principles and values, notably the rule of law, respect for human rights and the democratic system, and respect for the dignity of human beings’ (EPP-ED 2008a, 7,17). Amongst the main activities that characterize the party group’s politics towards the Mediterranean are its religious dialogue with Islam and the Orthodox Church and its input in the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (the latter not discussed in this paper).

The Christian Democrat Group in the EP asserts that it is ‘playing a major role in making the Mediterranean region the top priority in the EU’s external relations’ (EPP-ED 2008, 9). The

⁴² The same thinking is confirmed by Azza Karam, Senior Adviser of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In the PSE Conference, he argued that ‘a number of Islamist politicians come from former communist and socialist political convictions’ (PSE 2006, 68).

⁴³ Edward McMillan Scott is Vice President of the EP and was MEP in the EPP-ED from 1999-2009. He was elected EP chairman for election observation missions to the Palestinian Territories.

Group holds that despite financial allocations by the EU to the region, the amount remains ‘significantly inferior to the direct aid for Central and Eastern Countries provided by the EU,’ reaching a level where the definition of partnership remains ‘largely rhetorical.’ Moreover, as far as North-South relations are concerned, the ‘network of association agreements between the EU and each Mediterranean countries is progressing very slowly and it is still not fully operational’ (EPP-ED 2005, 1). The Group argues that the USA’s bilateral approach to the region (in comparison to the EU’s multilateral approach) is a preferred strategy and a more pragmatic approach.

The group organizes activities that include Study Days,⁴⁴ conferences, seminars and meetings to discuss developments and the way forward with some of the actors in the region. This adds to a number of visits by EPP-ED delegations that enable the party group to ‘build up stronger political contacts at bilateral and multilateral level.’ These visits are conducted with a view to making the EPP-ED’s ‘presence felt’ and ‘to establish a network of political links in the Mediterranean area,’ that enable the party group to ‘devise a joint strategy and develop relations with groups and parties’ which share their same values (EPP-ED 2008a, 63). Delegations include invitations to attend sister party activities, meetings with leaders, and visits which according to Bonsignore⁴⁵ help in gathering information and getting input that could trigger the Group to rethink its strategy (EPP-ED 2008d, 33).

Religion is one of the founding tenets of Christian Democracy and the EPP Group in the EP has actively advocated the importance of its Christian heritage in its political behaviour. The 9th Congress of the EPP, convened in Athens in 1992, adopted a set of principles⁴⁶ and values that shaped the view of politics of Christian Democrats. Referred to as the “Basic Programme,” this document lays an important belief which paved the way for stronger collaboration with the monotheistic religions: the transcendent dimension of human existence and the mention of God. Hence, one of the main political initiatives of the Christian Democratic group has been to initiate and maintain a dialogue with the other stronghold of

⁴⁴ These are meetings held by the party group since 1957 to discuss specific themes together with experts and players on the subject. The Study Days ‘define the Group’s political line on essential aspects of current political and Community developments.’ Study Days may be attended by up to 500 people and usually run for two-and-a-half days, while Bureau meetings are smaller and can be attended by 100 to 130 people. Between November 1957 and July 2008, the EPP Group held Bureau meetings or Study Days on no fewer than 209 occasions in 32 different countries (Fontaine 2009, 492:493).

⁴⁵ Vito Bonsignore is Vice-Chairman of the EPP-ED Group in the EP in concluding the meeting of the Group’s Bureau in Cyprus, 7-8 February 2008.

⁴⁶ The Athens declaration of Principles eventually became a benchmark for the EPP party, and new members (including Muslims) had to accept this programme to be admitted to the family.

Christianity, the Orthodox Church, and Islam. With the former it has cultivated a strong relationship that developed over a decade of annual dialogues. These dialogues revolved around the role of religion and the state, and the role of religion as an actor responding to events and patterns of human behaviour.

The collaboration between the EPP Group and the Orthodox Church was an opportunity to discuss the expectations of eastern and south-eastern European countries that were to form part of the upcoming EU enlargement in 2004. It was also a way of how the Church could 'hear reports on the situation of Christianity in those states of the EU where Christian Democracy is a political force'. The dialogue became a platform for the Church and the party group called for initiatives that promoted the interests of both. In the fifth dialogue (2001), EPP sister parties were invited to 'address and resolve before (EU) accession pending issues of Church-State relations' (EPP-ED 2008a, 52). Apart from the strengthened relationship with the Orthodox church, the meetings served as an arena to convene with other international actors and reach other political objectives. In the 2004 dialogue in Thessaloniki, Vojislav Koštunica, Prime Minister of Serbia, and Ivo Sanader, Prime Minister of Croatia, two leaders that had previously waged war against each other, met together and acknowledged the importance of converging towards the modern European vision of peace, stability, security, development and progress.

The EPP Group developed a strong connection with their Muslim counterparts. In 2005 the AKP (Justice and Development party in Turkey) became an observer member of the EPP political family thereby accepting its statute and common principles of membership. The relationship with Islam is more than a dialogue with religion. It is a relationship with the Arab world that opens further opportunities for development and cooperation, opening a channel to a frank exchange that can lead to constructive criticism and mutual understanding.

Engaging with Think Tanks and Foundations (TTFs) and Sister Parties

Parties at the European level have embarked on political initiatives that relied on the extensive support of Think Tanks and Foundations (TTFs). For example the Christian Democratic Group relies on the support of: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), Centre for European Studies (CES), European Ideas Network (EIN), while the Socialist Group counts on: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). The KAS has been actively present with the EPP Group to meet counterparts in Euro-Med parliaments through various meetings and seminars (EPP-ED 2008a, 17). It networks with a

number of political parties and local forces in the region if a common framework of ideas is shared.⁴⁷ Similarly, the FES has an analogous role with the Socialist Group spending half of its annual budget on international activities. The offices in international countries aim amongst others to give a contribution by (amongst others): ‘promoting peace and understanding between peoples and inside its partner countries; supporting the democratisation of the State and society and strengthening civil society; and facilitating regional and worldwide cooperation between states and different interest groups’ (FES 2009).

The concept of *sister* parties has also been crucial for European parties to gain political influence in countries that are not part of the EU. This was primarily necessary to garner support prior to EU enlargements where local parties were engaged to promote EU accession. The engagement of sister parties is carried out on the basis of sharing the same principles and values with a view to taking joint action at a political level. Relations with parties in countries where the dichotomy between Christian Democracy and Social Democracy is not necessarily present, take a different form. Alliances are forged on the acceptance of the European parties’ statutes, but are built on different grounds such as religion (e.g. AKP), their past as socialist parties or opposition to socialism.⁴⁸ The collaboration with sister parties in Arabic countries is fertile territory for the European parties. The EPP is keen on taking on parties that were also traditionally pro-socialist,⁴⁹ a state of affairs which does not seem to concern too much the European Socialists.⁵⁰

Analysis

It is through their resorting to dialogue (more than in any other way) that party groups, have constructed an identity as serious interlocutors in international affairs. The tactic is consistent with the EU’s soft power approach, bringing in other actors to the table over a clear strategy of negotiation and cooperation. A discussion of parties at the European level should never cease to view them as part of the EU system and conveyors of its philosophy. In this section, I summarize the salient observations of the investigation and then I evaluate the initial framework for actorness.

⁴⁷ Interview with Dr Peter Weilmann, Director Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 20th November 2009.

⁴⁸ In the case of African parties, my investigation confirms some of the observations put forward by van Zyl and Vorster (1997, 27:28), namely that for many of these parties, ‘ideological positioning and nuances policy development are relatively underdeveloped when compared to European ... politics.’ This behaviour is of importance to in understanding how parties become ‘sisters.’

⁴⁹ Interview with Paolo Licandro, Deputy Secretary-General of the EPP-ED Group, 27th April 2009.

⁵⁰ Interview with Jan Marinus Wiersma, Vice Chairman PSE Group 2004-2009, 29th April 2009.

Table 1: A recollection of salient observations of both party groups

Attribute / Policy Area	Socialists (PSE)	Christian Democrats (EPP-ED)
<i>International approach</i>	- Mutual recognition of actors - No preconditions (for e.g. dialogue with Syria, integration of Hezbollah)	- Conditional approach to rogue actors perceived to hijack peace process.
<i>Human dimension</i>	- Strength of collective to achieve lasting aims	- Centrality of individual responsibility
<i>Type of diplomacy</i>	- Multilateralism	- Take advantage of bilateralism - Qualified Multilateralism
<i>Case for military intervention</i>	- Very last resort	- Utilized if it solves security problem
<i>Middle East proclivity</i>	- Palestinian plight	- Israeli security
<i>Regional priority</i>	- Social Solidarity	- Security and Economic Prosperity
<i>Religion</i>	- Secularism as basis	- Enforcement of identity
<i>Religious Dialogue</i>	- Only contextual	- Special priority area
<i>Transatlantic relationship</i>	- Disapproval of hegemonic arbitrariness; - Condemnation of unilateralist interventions;	- Special relationship - Key alliance for security
<i>World view</i>	- Alliance of Civilizations	- Clash of Civilizations not true

Evaluating Actorness

A fair suggestion would be that any entity involved in a transaction is called an actor. But as I discussed earlier, an appropriate framework would require that actorness is qualified. By making an assessment of the observations in the investigation, I contend that evidence is sufficient to give enough credence to the idea that transnational party groups be also considered international actors. In the IR paradigm I adopted Bretherton and Vogler's framework (1999) for the evaluation of actorness, categorized accordingly as: (i) presence; (ii) opportunity; and (iii) capability. To these I added (iv) effectiveness and (v) recognition. Some of these are overlapping but an identification of what elements fall under each would help us understand better the nature of actor we are talking about (see table 2).

Table 2: A framework to evaluate international actorness

Framework	Explanation and adaptation
(i) Presence	Party groups have an institutional presence by way of their presence in the EP. As EU actors they have embarked on political initiatives with international actors securing a presence in the international system. Presence can be established as a result of opportunity.
(ii) Opportunity	In a liberal / pluralist paradigm, party groups find themselves as non-state actors playing a role in international events. Secondly they grasp the opportunity that multilateral diplomacy provides. An opportunity can be taken because the presence of the party group is there. The two are most of the times mutually exclusive.
(iii) Capability	Party groups dispose of ample human resources to conduct the necessary preparations for actorness to take place. Moreover, they are members of party families with extensive international networks that hold influence over key decision-makers in national and supranational arenas.
(iv) Effectiveness	Party groups have brought in actors at every level to the diplomatic table. The continuation of such efforts (e.g. religious dialogue - EPP Group) confirms the effectiveness of the initiatives taken. The continuity of such political efforts is a proof that the outcome of the process is conducive to further action or improvement i.e. it is effective.
(v) Recognition	External actors identify party groups as EU interlocutors and qualified actors with whom they can share their political agenda.

In the analysis of the party groups' behaviour, a recurring pattern characterizes the findings of the study. Transnational party groups do seek their political interests (such as the engagement of sister parties or promoting their political agenda to EU accession countries), but they are also participating in the international relations of the EU by attempting to shape consensus (through soft diplomacy) and project values and norms outside the EU's borders. Therefore we can say that party groups act as outriders by playing a role in the EU dimension. Besides seeking their political interests, party groups are participating in the international relations of the EU becoming an essential part of the soft power toolkit. External actors recognize this and they actively seek to interact with the Christian Democrat and Socialist party groups knowing that they belong to the biggest party families in Europe with representatives in the highest echelons of the EU institutions.

Conclusions

The challenge of this investigation is mostly conceptual. Breaking the mould of comparative politics to study political parties at the global level requires some thinking ‘outside the box.’ In their study of parliamentary party groups in European democracies, Heidar and Koole (eds.) (2000, 6:8) propose that party groups in the EP be treated as *sui generis* organisations, since applying the same working definition (as to other parliamentary party groups) would ‘reduce rather than enhance’ the understanding of both phenomena. However the *sui generis* attribute could be a two-edged sword. Since the EU remains an unconventional supranational structure, it allows myriad interpretations on the role and effectiveness of the various units that compose it. This article is one such interpretation.

Hanley (2008, 5) remarks that ‘all party families have a long history of involvement outside their frontiers’ but transnational parties continue to lack resonance and proper consideration among the EU’s international affairs. This research was developed on the premise that party groups in the EP enter into interactions with the outside world both through their parliamentary and extra-parliamentary duties. This behaviour suggests that their influence, power and legitimacy contribute to the evidence that the accusation of being unimportant actors in international affairs is a weak claim. If party groups engage in diplomacy and leave an impact on the international agenda, then IR should provide an explanation for it.

There are good reasons to believe that the Christian Democratic and Socialist Group in the EP fit the role of international actors. It no longer suffices, to assess the international relations of the EU (keeping the spotlight only on the Commission and Council of Ministers), without considering the role of transnational party groups and their interactions with external actors. Actorness has been constructed according to actors’ manifestations, spoken, written or accomplished. A liberal view of IR allows the promotion of actors’ interests. In the case study presented here, party groups promote the EU, principally on the basis of shared values to the periphery of Europe, raising awareness and fostering bilateral and multilateral relations.

The international actorness of party groups provides another approach of how party politics at the European level can be understood. I argue that party groups ‘going global’ is not just a way of appreciating their *saut qualitatif* but also an important foundation in the creation of real European parties in the future.

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