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## **Is the Europarty over, or has it only just begun? The importance of party members as a link between Europarties and citizens**

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Members are an integral part of most national political parties across Europe. Parties may want members ‘to help in campaigning, to provide electoral legitimacy, to run and finance the organization, to recruit new candidates for public office, to anchor the party in civil society, to sound out grassroots opinion and to develop new policies (Heidar, 2006: 304). It is however common knowledge that in the past decades, the majority of parties across Europe have experienced a decline in their membership levels, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the electorate (Van Biezen et al., 2011; Dalton, 2005; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). One hypothesis for party membership decline is that the ever closer relationship between parties and the state (due to growing state regulation and state funding) which is said to undermine the incentives for voluntary engagement (Whiteley, 2011; Katz and Mair, 1995). An alternative hypothesis suggests that parties lose members due to new forms of political engagement introduced by the internet. These involve activities such as writing political blogs, joining forums, joining social networking sites, participating in chat rooms, and signing electronic petitions (Oates et al., 2006). Due to the shrinking membership, parties across Europe now try to reach out to the wider electorate, involving them in their policy-making processes and primaries.

There is no shortage of academic literature discussing the decline of party membership and the impact this has on the linkage between parties and the electorate. If however we turn our attention to the party federations at the European level (‘Europarties’ from now on) we notice that the topic has received very little attention. This is perhaps not surprising, given that for the Europarties, individual membership is still a relatively new experience. Until recently, membership was restricted to national member parties and certain associations, while individuals had no opportunity to join the Europarties directly. In the past decade, however, Europarties have become more institutionalised and now manage their own

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budgets and headquarters (or secretariats), independent from their party groups in the European Parliament (Lightfoot, 2006). Perhaps as a consequence of this empowerment, all the major Europarties have introduced some form of individual membership, albeit under different terms and conditions.

This paper explores the consequences of individual membership for the link between Europarties and citizens. It examines whether the Europarties' individual members fulfil the classic linkage functions of national party members, namely: to help in campaigning, to provide electoral legitimacy, to run and finance the organization, to recruit new candidates for public office, to anchor the party in civil society, to sound out grassroots opinion, and to develop new policies. It will do so by comparing the membership schemes of the four major Europarties, namely the European Green Party (EGP), the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR), the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES). Comparative research helps us to 'broaden our intellectual horizon' (Halperin and Heath, 2012: 203) and this article compares how the four oldest, most established Europarties treat individual membership, and what this can tell us about the direct linkages between them and the citizens. To be sure, more Europarties have emerged in recent years, but the majority of them are still relatively small, ideologically heterogeneous, and loosely organised. Examining the four major Europarties is therefore more relevant and will allow us to pinpoint the general trends with regards to individual membership. This study relies on academic literature; official party documents (such as statutes, internal regulations, or declarations); and the parties' websites. Its originality however lies in the collection of original interview data with officials from the four parties.<sup>2</sup>

The first section will provide a brief overview of the Europarties' organizational development and their links with citizens. In the second section the individual membership policies of the EGP, ELDR, EPP and PES will be introduced and compared. Next, this article will examine the roles and functions currently fulfilled by the individual members. It concludes that just as Europarties are different kinds of organizations than their national member parties, their individual members do not fulfil all the functions of national party members. They (still) lack real power in the Europarties' decision-making processes, and this

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<sup>2</sup> Six semi-structured interviews were conducted for this article between May 2011 and June 2012: two with a deputy secretary general of the European People's Party; one with the secretary general and one with the deputy secretary general of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party; one with the secretary general of the European Green Party; and one with an official of the Party of European Socialists.

situation is unlikely to change in the near future. The individual members can however be a valuable asset for the Europarties and their member parties. They can potentially strengthen the linkage between Europarties and citizens because they can bring their EU knowledge and experience into election campaigns. This however will largely depend on three factors: first, the number of individual members; second, the attitude of national parties towards them; and thirdly, the capacity of the Europarties to manage a growing membership.

### **Are Europarties parties?**

In order to analyse and compare their individual membership schemes we first need to establish what kind of parties Europarties are. They were formed in the run-up to the first direct elections of the European Parliament in the mid-1970s. At that time they were referred to as ‘transnational party federations’ and were rather loosely organized. They ‘did not have highly sophisticated organizations at the European level, and did not have a clear and coherent policy orientation’ (Hix and Høyland, 2011: 141). Following the inclusion of the ‘party article’ in the Maastricht Treaty the parties re-launched themselves and established new and more coherent organizations (Hix and Høyland, 2011: 141). As Hix and Høyland (2011: 141) explain, these party federations have gradually developed into genuine Europarties, ‘albeit with limited power over their constituent national member parties or the political groups in the European Parliament.’ HERE: 3-4 sentences on how Europarties are structured.

However, the question if Europarties are political parties remains contested. In the past, parties have only existed at the domestic level where they fulfilled specific roles. They were described as vote-seeking, office-seeking and policy-seeking organization. Europarties do not fit easily into this role description. They are not vote-seeking because it is national parties who compete with each other in European parliamentary elections. They select the candidates and organise the election campaigns in the EU member states. The fact that they are members of Europarties is often overlooked in their campaigns. Secondly, Europarties can only be described as partially office-seeking: they share the allocation of office with their national member parties when influential positions in the European Parliament and other EU institutions are to be filled. Last but not least, Europarties are only partially policy-seeking organizations. They write pan-European election manifestos and other policy programs that are agreed to by all member parties. In the past, many of these pan-European manifestos

represented the lowest common denominator and were written in a vague language (reference). During European election campaigns, most national parties continued to refer to their own manifestos. Most scholars therefore argue that Europarties are federations of national parties, or even party networks (Raunio and Johannson, 2005; Bardi, 2002; Ladrech, 2000). In this article Europarties are understood as institutionalised forms of party organizations at the EU level that have seen a partial transfer of sovereignty from national member parties (Johansson and Zervakis, 2002). To be sure, national parties and member organisations (such as the party groups in the European Parliament) continue to be the backbone of the Europarties. Delegates from the member parties sit on the Europarties' executive committees and are therefore the key actors in the Europarties' policy-making processes. Given the size of the two biggest Europarties (EPP and PES) and the variety of ideological views of their member parties, agreement on common programmes is a complex process. Which space of influence does this leave to individual members, if any?

## **2. Europarties and individual membership**

Why did the four Europarties introduce individual membership in the first place? Interviews with officials from the four parties reveal that Europarties aim to become 'real parties', and for this to happen they need members. A quote from ELDR Secretary General Federica Sabbati (<http://www.eldr.eu>) confirms this: "the launch of Associate Membership for individuals is another step in the continuing development of the ELDR Party from a network of liberal parties into a fully fledged European political party'. Hence, individual members are seen to enhance the Europarties' status as real parties. Linked to this argument is the idea that individual members can provide electoral legitimacy. The former PES president Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (2009) once described the individual members (the 'PES activists') as 'the bridge builders between the national and the European scenes.' This goes to show that Europarties have become more ambitious in the past years and aim to establish a direct linkage with the citizens. Scarrow (2002) states that 'having a roster of party members (particularly a growing roster) conveys a message of popular legitimacy and enables a party to claim that it has strong ties to "ordinary citizens"'. This applies to national and European parties alike. Before introducing individual membership, Europarties had very little means to engage directly with ordinary citizens – this was seen as the prerogative of national parties. More importantly perhaps, Europarties lacked the financial resources and institutional weight

to run campaigns and involve citizens into their activities. Policy was made ‘in the intimacy of a narrow circle often restricted to the “international affairs” specialists of the national parties’ Moschonas (2002: 271) writes about the PES, but this applied to all Europarties. Arguably, through the introduction of individual membership, Europarties have become more inclusive. In the following section, the individual membership schemes of the four Europarties will be introduced and compared.

The European Greens, Liberals, People’s Party and Socialists have introduced individual membership under different names, terms and conditions (for a brief overview see table 1 below). The Greens introduced individual membership in 2004. Their members are called ‘supporters’. Article 6 of the EGP party statutes (2008) clarifies that ‘the status of supporters is open for every person who wishes to join Green structures on this European level and accepts the Green Charter of the European Green Party’. It has to be kept in mind however that any person wishing to join the EGP has to be a member of a national Green party. Supporters are entitled to regular information on policies of the EGP and ‘on application they may attend the meetings of the European Green Party and regional networks with a limited possibility to participate in discussions and without voting rights’ (EPG statutes, 2008). The EGP has set up the ‘Individual Supporters Network’ in March 2009 as a coordination structure. It was a bottom-up initiative and built on a meeting held by members of the Green parties of Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands in January 2002. This network has both grassroots’ representatives (2/3) and EGP committee nominees in its coordinating team. According to the supporters network’s website ([www.greenyourope.net](http://www.greenyourope.net)) the introduction of individual membership was not without controversy:

Some EGP member parties turned out to have serious doubts about the idea, fearing that individuals might undermine their position within the EGP, or that political enemies might join *en masse* through the European door and harm their position back home. Others were afraid that energy put into European action would sap forces needed for their own programme. And yet others, the majority, were simply not interested or put the issue at the bottom of their priority list.

In June 2012 the EGP had approximately 1500 supporters. Plans to increase their numbers included a more interactive website through which supporters and friends of the party could discuss party policies and participate in surveys.

The ELDR party refers to its individual members as ‘associate members’. The associate membership scheme was introduced in 2011, and the party wanted to ‘give it a go for one year and evaluate it at the beginning of 2012’ (interview with secretary general Federica Sabbati on 14/06/2011). The evaluation took place in May 2012, and on this occasion the associate members were given more powers. In the party statutes (2004) it is stated that membership is open to all citizens who accept the articles of association, internal regulations, policy programmes and the Stuttgart Declaration from 1976. From the party’s website ([www.eldr.eu](http://www.eldr.eu)) we learn that ‘for 25 euros annually, associate membership cardholders have privileged access to ELDR events, home delivery of publications and much more’. Any person can join the ELDR party, whether he or she is a member of a national liberal party or not. When applying for membership, however, applicants need to declare that they are not a member of any national party that does not belong to the liberal party family. They are moreover asked why they want to join the ELDR and how they want to contribute to ‘the development of organized European Liberalism’ (<http://www.eldr.eu>). This information can help the party to understand their members’ motivations and involve them in future activities. For every 500 associate members, one delegate is selected who has the right to attend the party congress where she or he can join working groups and make amendments to resolutions, but does not have the right to vote. For the 2011 ELDR Congress in Palermo, one associate member was selected by her peers (out of 17 candidates) in an online election to represent the group. One year in, in June 2012, the ELDR had 260 associate members. According to party official Philipp Hansen (interviewed on 07/06/2012) the majority of the associate members lived in Brussels and worked in the EU environment, but came from different national backgrounds. Another major group of associate members came from the Netherlands where the ELDR has two member parties (the Democraten 66 and Volkpartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie). There are different reasons why individuals join the ELDR. For some of them, joining the ELDR can be interpreted as a signal of disapproval of their national party’s EU policy. The majority of associate members who weren’t members of any national liberal party came from Spain and France where there are no nation-wide liberal parties. The ELDR wanted to give these individuals the opportunity to join, which is why

they opened up membership to non-party members. Moreover, ELDR Secretary General Federica Sabbati (interviewed on 14/06/2011) explains: ‘We see associate members as a possibility for parties to get support, and not necessarily as a threat. They can bring us more votes and supporters. But this isn’t an easy step. The ELDR goes much further than most other parties’.

The EPP’s individual members are called ‘supporting members’ and were introduced in the mid-1990s. The party leadership wanted to create a ‘real party with members’ as Christian Kremer, the EPP’s deputy secretary general explains (interviewed on 06/06/2012). In its statutes (2011) the party does not refer to the supporting members, but in the internal regulations (2011) they are listed as invitees to the EPP congress where they have no right to vote. According to Article 15 they may be invited by the President to attend meetings of certain organs or bodies of the party. Kremer (interviewed on 31/05/2012) reveals that in the future the party might grant the supporting members voting rights. At the moment, supporting members receive newsletters and invitations to the EPP Congress. Moreover, they are sometimes invited to working group meetings, but this is a rather informal process. Supporting members pay 20 euro per year. ‘It is primarily a symbolic membership’, as Kremer (interviewed on 31/05/2011) explains. In June 2012 the party had xxx supporting members, the majority of which were German and Italian. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most recent applications for individual membership were made by pro-EU British conservatives and former conservative party members who saw EPP membership as a means to express their EU views. It needs to be added that applicants for supporting membership do not have to be members of a EPP national member party. The EPP secretariat will however get in touch with its member party in the applicant’s country to check if there are reservations against the applicant’s EPP membership.

The PES introduced individual membership, the ‘PES activists’, in 2005. All members of the PES member parties are automatically members of the PES, but have to register first online. Already during the 1990s the PES had introduced some kind of individual membership, namely local associations with the aim to establish networks of activists who could facilitate the identification of European nationals and encourage them to vote. One example was the PES-London Association, which however lacked funding and official recognition (Day and Shaw, 2006: 113). The PES then re-introduced individual

membership under Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's leadership in 2005. Article 15 of the PES statutes (2009) reads as follows:

All members of PES member parties are automatically members of the PES. Those who wish to be active in the PES can register as PES activists. PES activists must be members of their national Party. PES activists can set up city groups. The PES Presidency adopts operating rules for PES activists.

Hence, the PES' individual membership scheme is only open for members of national parties. The activists take part in PES Congresses and Councils where they have no voting rights. According to the activists' website ([www.pes.org/en/pes-activists](http://www.pes.org/en/pes-activists)) 135 city groups have emerged across Europe (June 2012). Each city group has a leader who is the point of contact with the PES. In June 2012 the PES had 15.457 registered activists across Europe, with a growth rate of approximately 100 new activists per month (interview with party official Terry Connolly on 07/06/2012). The majority of activists were from France, Romania, Sweden and Portugal. Especially the French Socialist Party (PS) and the Swedish Social Democrats (SAP) have integrated the PES activists into their local party branches, so interaction between the activists and the party is tight. It is however up to each party to decide whether and how it integrates the activists, which means that there is a lot of variety across Europe.

**Table 1: Overview of Europarties' individual membership schemes**

<b>Europarty</b>	<b>Individual members</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Is national party a precondition for joining?</b>	<b>Membership fee per annum</b>	<b>Number of registered members (June 2012)</b>
<b>EGP</b>	Supporters	2004	yes	€24	1500
<b>ELDR</b>	Associate Members	2011	no	€25	260
<b>EPP</b>	Supporting members	1990s	no	€20	Between 200-300 (TBC)
<b>PES</b>	PES Activists	2005	yes	none	15.457

### **3. Which roles do individual Europarty members play?**

Do the Europarties' individual members fulfil the classic functions of national party members, namely: to help in campaigning, to provide electoral legitimacy, to run and finance the organization, to recruit new candidates for public office, to anchor the party in civil society, to sound out grassroots opinion and to develop new policies?

#### **Campaigning**

In general, one of the main roles of party members is to campaign during and outside of elections. Do the four Europarties' individual members campaign? The picture is mixed.

The Green supporters campaigned across borders during the 2004 and 2009 European elections and also participated in anti-nuclear campaigns ([www.greenyourope.net](http://www.greenyourope.net)). They often campaign on policy issues with a cross-border relevance, such as nuclear waste storage or problems caused by airports (such as noise pollution). As the EGP's secretary general Jacqueline Cremers (interviewed on 05/06/2012) explains, the European Greens do not have the means to campaign directly in every EU member state. They can however link the supporters network to the local and regional branches of the member parties, and for the 2014 European elections the EGP intends to use some of its supporters as 'Euro-ambassadors' to help lead the European election campaigns at grassroots level. The party will also try to bring the supporters and friends together to do some canvassing, which has already been tried successfully in the Netherlands.

The Liberals' associate membership scheme was only created after the 2009 European elections, which means that so far, they haven't had the chance to campaign in European elections. Secretary General Federica Sabbati (interviewed on 14/06/2011) does however have plans for the future: 'We want to involve them in the next European election campaign but are not sure yet how. They might be a very useful pool of people for the campaign'. Party official Phillipp Hansen (interviewed on 07/06/2012) also signalled that in the future the ELDR might send the associate members campaign material and support them in the organization of events. In addition, the ELDR might create an online platform where associate members could lead policy debates and make amendments to policy documents. The 2014 European election campaign will be an experiment for the involvement of the ELDR's associate members.

The EPP's supporting members were not actively involved in the 2009 European elections campaign, but the party's aim is to include them and the party's *Facebook* friends into the 2014 European election campaign, possibly through an online platform.

Many of the PES Activists were active campaigners during the 2009 European elections. The PES organized five 'European Days of Action' in the months leading to the elections on topics such as 're-launching the economy'. Activists were given campaign material (the 'election toolkit') by the PES and organized a variety of events. For example, campaign exchanges were organized between city groups (e.g. between Berlin and Paris). Activities were communicated via *Twitter* and *Facebook* and posted on the PES blog (<http://elections2009.pes.org>). PES activists have also campaigned in national elections. For example, a number of activists from across Europe joined their French counterparts during the 2012 presidential election campaign of Francois Hollande. In general, the PES sees its role as a coordinator, leaving it to the activists to organize their events – as long as this is done in coordination with the member parties.

We can therefore conclude that so far, the Green supporters and the PS activists have participated in numerous campaigns. The ELDR and EPP's individual members have not yet done so, but both the EPP and ELDR have plans to involve their supporters in future EU election campaigns.

### **Recruitment of new candidates for public office**

National party members' tasks also include the recruitment of new candidates for public office. Does this apply to the Europarties' individual members? The answer is no. Candidates for European parliamentary elections are selected by the national parties. National party leaders also appoint or elect the Europarties' leadership (party leader, secretary general) and none of the four Europarties has given the supporters the right to cast their votes in leadership elections. European Commissioners and other high-level politicians at the European level are selected by national governments. It can thus be concluded that the EGP's supporters, ELDR's associate members, EPP supporting members and PES activists are not involved in the recruitment of candidates for public office.

### **Running and financing the party organization**

Can we expect the Europarties' individual members to 'run and finance the party organization' (Heidar, 2006: 304) like national party members do (at least to a certain

extent)? First of all, it needs to be kept in mind that not all national parties are funded by their members. Party funding rules differ significantly across the EU. In some countries parties receive rather generous state funding (as in Germany) whilst in others they mainly rely on membership fees and donors (such as the UK). Europarties receive the largest bulk of their funding from the European Parliament and smaller amounts from the member parties and associations. Their budget has increased in recent years, but given the current economic and financial crisis, further increases seem unrealistic, as the EGP's secretary general Jacqueline Cremers (interviewed on 05/06/2012) explains. At the moment, the amount of money contributed by individual members to the parties' overall budget is either non-existent or very low. The PES does not charge any membership fee, which according to party official Terry Connolly (interviewed on 07/06/2012) can create a 'cash flow problem'. Two full-time staff members of the PES manage the activists, and there is a special strand of the PES' annual budget dedicated to the activists. It has been increased in 2012 in order to fund some projects and events that are organised by the activists at grassroots level. Furthermore this budget is used to fund campaigning workshops for activists and the annual forum which a couple of hundreds of activists attend each year. It is therefore safe to say that the activists do not finance the PES.

The EGP, ELDR and EPP charge between 20 and 25 Euros per annum, so the overall income generated from the individual members is very low. According to Christian Kremer (the EPP's deputy secretary general, interviewed on 06/06/2012) the membership fee is merely a 'symbolic one that shows that we take our supporting members seriously'. The Greens' Secretary General, Jacqueline Cremers (interviewed on 05/06/2012) mentioned that many party members in poorer countries cannot easily afford to pay an annual fee of 24 euro (in addition to their national party membership fee), which might prevent them from joining the EGP. They can however become a friend of the EGP, which is free of charge.

The examples given from the four Europarties go to show that the decision to raise membership fees brings advantages (e.g. more funds) and disadvantages (people in the poorer EU member states do not join). In any case, for membership fees to make a significant contribution to the parties' budgets, the number of individual members would need to increase.

The Europarties' individual members do not finance the party organization, and they do not run it either. The member parties and associations continue to pull their weight in the

decision-making process and this is likely to remain the case. Until today, none of the four major Europarties has granted their individual members the right to vote in the decision-making bodies. Should the individual members ever get voting rights, it will have to be very carefully balanced with the member parties' rights. The member parties remain the gatekeepers, and it will be their decision to grant the individual members voting rights.

This however does not mean that the individual members are excluded from the policy-making process: they are invited to the party congresses where they can voice their opinions and organize fringe meetings. A number of individual members also sit on the parties' working groups where policy is made and manifestos are written. The EGP's supporters can also issue resolutions that the EPG leadership needs to take into consideration, or make amendments to policy documents. 'They have real agenda-setting power, which I consider very important', EGP secretary general Jacqueline Cremers (interviewed on 05/06/2012) stresses. The ELDR's associate members have recently been given the right to make amendments on party resolutions, but they do not have the power to write resolutions themselves. The party does however seem to be open to grant the associate members more rights in the future.

The PES also involves the activists into the policy-making process. They contributed to the writing of the PES 2009 election manifesto through an open consultation process and will be invited to contribute to the 2014 election manifesto. PES activists meet in annual forums organized by the PES to give them the opportunity to meet, exchange their views and strategies, and to attend workshops. Since the European elections of 2009, the PES has strengthened and clarified the role of the activists. In a resolution (A New Way Forward, A stronger PES) published after the 2009 European elections, the PES declares that

PES activists have led a tremendous campaign during the European elections. Party members are vital for building a genuine European Party, so we will provide more tools for them to get involved. This is why we have decided to recognize their role in the PES statutes and create a 'PES activists initiative' in order to build a true European activism, and be heard by PES bodies. PES activists are fantastic multipliers that give PES member parties the opportunity to raise awareness amongst all party members on European politics. We must nurture their involvement.

In February 2010, the PES presidency then adopted a document entitled ‘the PES activists initiative’ which is based on the concept of the European Citizens Initiative: if a certain number of PES activists sign a political proposal or a comment on PES policies and a minimum threshold is exceeded, the initiative is tabled at the PES presidency. This ‘PES activists initiative’ could help the PES to ‘sound out grassroots opinion and to develop new policies’ (Heidar, 2006: 304) – a role normally fulfilled by national party members. Yet, as PES official Terry Connolly (interviewed on 08/07/2012) acknowledges, organizing such an initiative is a challenging undertaking: it needs to be on a topic that can mobilise the activists, and it needs to be within the realm of the PES presidency. Furthermore, the initiative needs to be translated into a number of European languages if it is supposed to reach grassroots activists across the EU. The ‘activists initiative’ is still in its experimental phase, and it would therefore be too early to assess its overall impact on the PES’ internal policy-making processes.

The examples given above demonstrate the Europarties’ willingness to extend the powers of their individual members. It is however a gradual process which very much depends on the attitudes of the national parties. Whether individual members will ever be given full voting powers in the Europarties’ official bodies is far from certain – not least because a complex system of proportional representation would need to be in place, and the member parties would need to agree to share their power.

### **Linking the Europarties with European citizens**

The question remains if individual members can link the Europarties with European citizens or if this role is reserved for national party members. This depends on a number of factors. Most importantly, the four major Europarties need a significant number of individual members in order to raise attention and make a difference. This is a difficult task in times when many established parties lose members, and the majority of citizens lack interest in and enthusiasm for the European Union. Moreover, the potential to link Europarties and citizens depends on the member parties’ willingness to support and promote the Europarties’ individual membership schemes. At the moment, not many national party members are aware of the possibility to join a Europarty. On their website the Green supporters ([www.greenyourope.net](http://www.greenyourope.net)) express their concerns as to why individual membership is not growing at a fast rate:

For individuals, the national level still prevailed. People joining our group do so out of idealism or the desire to be part of a European political space, not out of political necessities like winning elections, building a political career or tabling proposals for change; those battles are still fought in the national arena. The same could be said for parties, whose support is indispensable. It is the main reason that, for most, implementing the EGP Supportership and stimulating international participation still aren't high on the priority lists.

This quote highlights two important facts: first, that joining a Europarty is still an elitist thing to do, in the sense that it mostly attracts 'idealistic' people who move across borders, possibly speak foreign languages, and are interested in EU politics (and in some cases even work for the EU). Second, if Europarties want to increase the numbers of individual members and give them voting rights they will need the support of the member parties. Otherwise, party statutes cannot be changed. In an effort to communicate with a broader group of people, the EGP has introduced the notion of 'friends' in May 2012. One month later the party had 150 friends. Anyone can become a friend of the EGP; membership of a national member party is not a prerequisite. Offering the voters the option to become friends of the EGP is 'an experiment', and according to the secretary general, Jacqueline Cremers (interviewed on 05/06/2012), the friends will get a voice once their number will be significant (20.000 and more). The EPP also seems to concentrate its communication efforts on the 75.000 *Facebook* friends. In the 2009 European election campaign the party did not use any social networking sites at all, but has discovered *Facebook* and *Twitter* as useful tools in the meantime: '*Facebook* has great potential for the 2014 election campaign. We will open up to more participation' party official Christian Kremer (interviewed on 06/06/2012) says. The PES also uses social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* to communicate their policies, but prefers to concentrate on increasing their number of activists. The ELDR is only in the beginnings of building up a membership basis.

## **Conclusions**

In recent years the major four Europarties, namely the Greens, Liberals, People's Party and Socialists, have introduced some form of individual membership in an effort to enhance their status as real parties and establish closer links with the electorate. This article has compared the four membership policies and revealed both differences and similarities.

The Socialists and Greens are most advanced in terms of the number of members, their geographical outreach, and campaigning activities. The ELDR's individual membership scheme is still young but has the potential to grow. The EPP also has plans to expand its individual membership, but focuses its communication efforts on the party's *Facebook* friends. The Liberals, Greens and Socialists have gradually given their individual members more powers, such as the right to: write resolutions (Greens); make amendments on party resolutions (ELDR); or submit a policy proposal ('initiative') to the party presidency (PES). However, none of the four Europarties grant their individual members voting rights.

Europarties are different from national parties, and at present, their individual members do not and cannot fulfil the roles of national party members. They campaign in European (and domestic) elections; but they don't recruit new candidates for public office. They neither run nor finance the Europarty organizations as their numbers are still too low. Individual members could potentially help to link the Europarties to the voters, but this again depends on their numbers and the national parties' willingness to support and promote them. Europarties will not become mass parties at a time when their national member parties struggle to recruit new members, so their linkage with the voters might remain limited. Individual members can however help Europarties to increase their visibility at the national level and 'Europeanize' election campaigns. After all, these members are interested in EU politics and should feel comfortable discussing them with the voters. They could be a real asset for national parties and Europarties alike. It is therefore not the end of the Europarty, but time for a new experiment.

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