



FEPS

Rue Montoyer 40 | 1000 Brussels (Belgium)



**FEPS YOUNG
ACADEMICS
NETWORK**

Why the Left needs Europolitics

Working Group on Europolitics

Lefteris ANTONOPOULOS

Mario GAVENDA

Nicola GENGA

Jesper Dahl KELSTRUP

Nicolas LERON

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FEPS YOUNG ACADEMICS NETWORK

The Young Academics Network (YAN) was established in March 2009 by the Foundation of European Progressive Studies (FEPS) with the support of the Renner Institut to gather progressive PhD candidates and young PhD researchers, who are ready to use their academic experience in a debate about the Next Europe. The founding group was composed of awardees of the “Call for Paper” entitled “Next Europe, Next Left” – whose articles also help initiating the FEPS Scientific Magazine “Queries”. Quickly after, with the help of the FEPS member foundations, the group enlarged – presently incorporating around 30 outstanding and promising young academics.

FEPS YAN meets in the Viennese premises of Renner Institut, which offers great facilities for both reflections on the content and also on the process of building the network as such. Both elements constitute mutually enhancing factors, which due to innovative methods applied make this Network also a very unique project. Additionally, the groups work has been supervised by the Chair of the Next Left Research Programme, Dr. Alfred Gusenbauer – who at multiple occasions joined the sessions of the FEPS YAN, offering his feedback and guidance.

This paper is one of the results of the third cycle of FEPS YAN, (the first one ended with three papers in June 2011, while the second one led to five papers in spring 2013), in which six key themes were identified and were researched by FEPS YAN working groups. These topics encompass: “*Precarious employment in Europe*”; “*Full employment: A progressive vision for Europe*”; “*Get the party started: Modernizing progressive politics*”; “*The 2014 European elections*”; “*Enhancing EU enlargement*” and “*Young and easily allured? A comparative analysis on the relationship between populism and youth in Europe*”. Each of the meetings is an opportunity for the FEPS YAN to discuss the current state of their research, presenting their findings and questions both in the plenary, as also in the respective working groups. The added value of their work is the pan-European, innovative, interdisciplinary character – not to mention, that it is by principle that FEPS wishes to offer a prominent place to this generation of academics, seeing in it a potential to construct alternative that can attract young people to progressivism again. Though the process is very advanced already, the FEPS YAN remains a Network – and hence is ready to welcome new participants.

FEPS YAN plays also an important role within FEPS structure as a whole. The FEPS YAN members are asked to join different events (from large Conferences, such as FEPS “Call to Europe” or “Renaissance for Europe” and PES Convention to smaller High Level Seminars and Focus Group Meetings) and encouraged to provide inputs for publications (i.e. for FEPS Scientific Magazine “Queries”). Enhanced participation of the FEPS YAN Members in the overall FEPS life and increase of its visibility remains one of the strategic goals of the Network for 2014.

AUTHORS



Lefteris Antonopoulos is a researcher on European Cohesion Policy. His research interests are related to issues of policy change in Cohesion policy, EU Enlargement, administrative capacity building and Europeanisation in Southeast Europe. He has worked as a policy researcher at the University of Strathclyde, the University of West Macedonia, and the Computer Technology Institute.



Mario Gavenda is a doctoral candidate in political science in the research programme “The Politics of Representation in Europe” at the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) Vienna. His research interest concerns the role of political parties both in European integration and democratic theory. His current dissertation project investigates the ideological and strategic aspects of political contestation and party competition on the EU dimension.



Nicola Genga is Research Fellow in Political Science at the Department of Communication and Social Research of “Sapienza” University of Rome and a member of the “Centro per la Riforma dello Stato”. He was Visiting Fellow at University Paris-Est Créteil. He published *Le parole dell’Eliseo* (Roma, 2012) and *Il Front National da Jean-Marie a Marine Le Pen* (Soveria Mannelli, 2015). *La destra nazionale-populista in Francia*. He is also a member of SISP (Italian Society of Political Science).



Jesper Dahl Kelstrup holds an Assistant Professorship in the field of public administration, collaborative governance and European policymaking at Roskilde University in Denmark. Jesper has a special research interest in understanding the implications of think tanks and developments in the wider field of policy expertise in Europe.



Nicolas Leron is associate researcher in political science at the Centre of European studies of Sciences Po Paris. He taught at Sciences Po Paris and the University of Paris-III Sorbonne-Nouvelle. He works on the European Court of Justice and legal integration, and more generally on the structure of the European political system. He is also the founder and president of EuroCité, a Paris-based left-wing think tank dedicated to European affairs (www.eurocite.eu).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper starts from the observation of a structural trend of depoliticisation that cuts across all levels of governance within the European multi-level polity. The consensual logic of the European institutions not only favours the status quo at the EU level, but increasingly also weighs down on national politics. In contrast to many scholars' expectations, traditional 'left-right' party competition has not been transposed to the European level. Rather, the 'mainstream vs. fringe' party logic at work in the European Parliament has become also more common in a number of member-states. This paper asks why and in what way this depoliticizing trend constitutes a particular challenge for social democracy and points to possible pathways for a politicization that is conducive to a progressive project for Europe.

We first review the current state of development of a European party system ('Europarty system'), and identify two main challenges ahead: (1) 'Deepening', that is, 'vertical integration' of all levels within a party organization, from the European party federations to the grassroots level. (2) 'Widening', pertaining to the 'horizontal integration' of the Europarty system in a double-sense, across the whole range of EU member-states and across all party-political *familles spirituelles*. While the social-democratic family has often taken the lead on both dimensions, the paper recommends additional steps to be taken in order to draw other left forces into a progressive project, vital for the future of European democracy.

As regards point (1), 'deepening', the paper assesses attempts at connecting grassroots activists to the European level, for instance in the form of PES city groups, and finds 'embryonic Europartisanship structures' to have emerged around the 2014 European election campaign. Central issues for the further development in this area pertain to the establishment of coordination structures, the pooling and sharing of resources and investment in IT systems and new media. Point (2), the 'widening' of the Europarty system, requires extending the debate about alternatives for Europe to forces outside of the current pro-EU alliance of social democrats, Christian democrats and liberals. While the top-candidate procedure of the 2014 EP elections was a step into this direction (notably with the fielding of Green and Left Party candidates), the campaign has not gone beyond a personalized version of the established consensus logic. The paper then reflects on the strength of a left coalition in the European Parliament and argues for 'agonistic pluralism' in the form of a competitive multi-party approach.

The paper gives four policy recommendations:

- I. A genuine, democratic and pluralistic Europolitics based on the strengthening of Europarties, which should develop the institutional clout to disagree on European policies on the left-right axis.
- II. A vertical integration and deepening of the links between all organisational units – from local activists to the executive – and territorial levels in the structure of Europarties and Eurofoundations.
- III. A widening of Europarties to reach out to social and political forces that have so far been outside the mainstream EU political process, also including those from more reluctant national backgrounds and eurosceptic leanings.
- IV. An institutional reform to entrust responsibility for the EU budget to European institutions and allow genuine democratic control by European citizens through the EP.

Abstract

This paper examines the potential of a progressive, left-wing politicisation of EU affairs as an instrument for revamping the process of European integration. In the context of successful Eurosceptic mobilization of opposition to the EU, the failure of previous attempts to develop a coherent progressive vision for Europe is explained by the structural logic of depoliticisation prevailing at all levels of the EU polity. This analysis provides the basis to identify various starting points for political agency to counterbalance the prevailing economic logic. A multi-method approach has been used, which consists of reviews of EU policy documents, the qualitative study of transnational activist practices and the mapping of actor and coalition strength in the European Parliament. The article suggests that the institutional deepening and widening of Europarties, the strengthening of transnational interactions at all party levels and increased contestation along the left-right axis are essential building blocs of a political movement for a progressive change of direction in Europe.

Keywords: politicisation, EU governance, austerity, political integration, coalition-building

Introduction¹

Social democracy has always had an ambiguous relationship with European integration. On the one hand, the left distrusted the technocratic economic arrangements of the original European communities (EC), spearheaded by Jean Monnet, a French civil servant connected to political and business elites across Europe and the United States. Additionally, the EC's institutional design was from the beginning influenced by German ordoliberalism, granting the state a firm but only limited role in economic life². These formative years of Europe's post-war settlement saw the various national labour movements' integration into nation-state settlements, creating an attachment to the various national welfare institutions³.

On the other hand, the political unification of the continent was greeted as an extension of the struggle for socialist ideals.⁴ While some ambivalence remained, the social-democratic party family has in the past decades become firmly integrated into the pro-European mainstream of European politics. All the more so, since the *relance européenne* beginning in the 1980s and culminating in the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht was considerably shaped by the French socialist Jacques Delors as President of the European Commission. At the centre of the new social-democratic strategy was the aim to transform the EU from a purely market-making into to a market-correcting project with a strong social dimension. This *distinct ideological project* of "regulated capitalism"⁵ on a continental scale was thus to be built by continual incremental reform.

In recent years, the topic of European integration has become severely contested in national mass publics, not least because the social promises have not materialised. However, the drivers of this development are not social democrats but mainly the radical and populist right⁶. Why, then, given the above depiction of the social-democratic programmatic turn to 'Social Europe', did this *politicisation* not lead social-democrats to formulate a coherent reformist agenda for the future of the EU? This paper attempts to answer this question, and, based on the diagnosis, give indications on how progressive forces can benefit from the politicisation of European integration, in what we will refer to in the following as 'Europolitics'.

¹ We thank Daphne Halikiopoulou, Isabelle Hertner, Ania Skrzypek, Judit Tanczos, Marju Lauristin MEP and the participants of the FEPS YAN seminars for their helpful and incisive comments on earlier versions of this paper. Additionally, we thank the organisers at FEPS for facilitating our work during the entire process.

² C. Joerges, *What is Left of the European Economic Constitution?*, [in:] EUI Working Paper LAW, N°13, 2004.

³ S. Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press 2006.

⁴ The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) first called for a "United States of Europe" in its Heidelberg Program as early as 1925.

⁵ L. Hooghe and G. Marks, *The Making of a Polity: The Struggle over European Integration*, [in:] H. Kitschelt, P. Lange, G. Marks and J. D. Stephens (eds.), *Continuity and Change in Contemporary Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press 1999, pp. 70-97.

⁶ L. Hooghe and G. Marks, *A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus*, [in:] *British Journal of Political Science*, N°39(1), 2009, pp. 1-23.

We argue that social democrats are facing a serious challenge stemming from the very structure of Europe's complex multi-level system of governance⁷. This architecture leads to a structural trend of *depoliticisation* across the European and national levels: the inability to propose different policy alternatives that are debated and voted on by citizens and their representatives. What remains is the politicisation of governance structures as such, which is what we see in the opposition of the extremist fringes of the party system to the European polity as a whole⁸. We do however not intend to take a crude structuralist position, but rather want to highlight the constraining nature of a political *structure* in order to identify possibilities of political *agency*⁹. Indeed, it is not simply the objective logic of the structures weighing down on social democrats, but rather their own *wilful* inscription into this logic. Thus, we consider it possible to open up space for a *politicised* debate and to propose a forceful progressive agenda for Europe in this debate.

For this to happen, the approach of patiently working for incremental change no longer works. One possible answer is wholesale institutional reform, in which political responsibility for the EU budget would reside with the European institutions. This, of course, would also require genuine democratic control over the distribution of the budget by the European citizens represented by the European Parliament. While this would indeed be a desirable solution, in the current situation governments feel greatly constrained by Eurosceptic contender parties and view any treaty change with the utmost caution. We thus suggest a different route, one that rests on the emergence of a vibrant 'Europolitics', that is, the struggle for power and policy goals at the European level. To move forward on this path, political parties, and in particular a revamped social-democratic movement, should be considered vital actors. Only once the political climate in Europe changes in a more progressive direction can institutional reforms be seriously contemplated.

Our argument is structured in the following way: After we discuss the structural trend of depoliticisation pervading European politics, we review the current state of the Europarty system and show why we think further developments in this area are of utmost importance. We identify two main challenges, which we then discuss in turn. (1) 'Deepening', i.e. 'the vertical integration' of all levels within a party organization from the grassroots to the European level, is discussed and illustrated with the example of the Party of European Socialists (PES) city groups in the 2014 European election campaign. Since embryonic Europartisan structures seem to have emerged, the need for better coordination structures, the pooling and sharing of resources and investment in IT systems and new media are highlighted. (2)

⁷ G. Marks, L. Hooghe and K. Blank, *European integration since the 1980s: State-centric versus multi-level governance*, [in:] *Journal of Common Market Studies*, N°34(3), 1996, pp. 341-378.

⁸ To make sense of the seeming contradiction between the often diagnosed politicisation of EU affairs in recent years and our contention of a depoliticising logic, it is useful to adopt a distinction between 'politicisation I' and 'politicisation II': 'Politicisation I' refers to the demand for collective regulation of societal problems, especially on the supranational level, while 'politicisation II' concerns the contestation of the legitimacy of an already existing system of regulations. While we observe 'politicisation II' today mainly as Eurosceptic opposition to the EU, 'politicisation I' is underdeveloped in the European Union, especially in the field of social and economic policy. In addition, we argue that European integration in its current form is in fact *depoliticising* social and economic policy (i.e. chipping away at existing arrangements for the collective regulation of societal problems). For the conceptual distinction used here, see C. Rauh and M. Zürn, *Zur Politisierung der EU in der Krise*, [in:] M. Heidenreich (ed.), *Krise der europäischen Vergesellschaftung? Soziologische Perspektiven*, Springer VS Wiesbaden 2014, p. 126.

⁹ For an insightful discussion of the relationship between structure and agency in the social sciences, see C. Hay and D. Wincott, *Structure, Agency and Historical Institutionalism*, [in:] *Political Studies*, N°46(5), 1998, pp. 951-957.

The ‘widening’ or ‘horizontal integration’ of the Europarty system requires extending the debate about political alternatives for Europe. While the 2014 EP elections were a step in this direction, it did not lead to a level of politicization we regard as sufficient to break with the depoliticized logic described above. The paper then reflects on the strength of left and right coalitions in the European Parliament and argues for a competitive multi-party approach.

The structural logic of depoliticisation in Europe

In order to clarify the argument on the *structural* trend of depoliticisation that is brought about by the European Union in its present form, it is instructive to turn to a three-dimensional concept of political regimes:

- 1) Polity: the political and institutional architecture, in other words: the “rules of the game”;
- 2) Politics: the struggle to wield political power, that is: “the game in itself”;
- 3) Policy: actions and achievements of the regime, or: “the results of the game”.

The particularity of the European political system is that one can find these three dimensions both at the EU and member state level (leaving aside further sub-national levels of governance, which are, for our purposes, fully integrated into member state political regimes). We thus arrive at the following schema:

EU level	<i>Polity</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Policy</i>
Member states level	<i>Polity</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Policy</i>

The complex interaction between these six dimensions on two levels of governance leads to the depoliticization of the whole system. Indeed, the depoliticization trend affects both levels, as we will see in more detail below. The dynamic is systemic or structural because it stems from the intrinsic architecture of the system. The challenge for social democracy that grows out of this is two-fold: it endangers, first, European democracy as such and, second, hampers the ability to implement left-wing policies at any level of the system.

The systemic process of depoliticization takes the following form: at the European Union level, politics are greatly circumscribed. European elections are still second-order national elections and citizens are not well aware of the debates and dynamics in and around the European institutions. This is why Vivien Schmidt described the EU as “policies without politics”¹⁰. In our view, the problem however goes even deeper, as there is also not enough of “policies” while the few existing redistributive or progressive policies at EU level have undergone neoliberal *drift*, *displacement* and *dismantling* attempts^{11,12}. As demonstrated by Fritz Scharpf, the “joint decision trap” effect (i.e. the difficulty to overcome the status

¹⁰ V. Schmidt, *Democracy in Europe: The EU and National Politics*, Oxford University Press 2006.

¹¹ W. Streeck and K. A. Thelen (eds.), *Beyond Continuity: Institutional change in advanced political economies*, Oxford University Press 2005, p. 31.

¹² M. Bauer, A. Jordan, C. Pedersen and A. Heritier (eds.), *Dismantling Public Policy: Preferences, Strategies and Effects*, Oxford University Press, 2013

quo in a qualified majority voting system) hampers the ability of the EU to decide on new policies, especially those with redistributive effects, i.e. costing some member-states while benefiting others¹³. Thus, we argue that the EU is more of a “polity without politics and policies” than “policies without politics”.

However, this is not to say that nothing relevant happens at the European level. The status quo is clearly biased towards market liberalization and deregulation: in the absence of political decisions, integration often proceeds through the removal of national regulations by the ECJ, without any real prospect of re-establishing regulations at the EU level. Contrary to what Majone’s notion of the EU as “regulatory state”¹⁴ posits, these mechanisms do indeed have redistributive implications¹⁵. Besides explicitly redistributive but modest schemes such as EU structural funds, this also applies to rather technical matters such as monetary policy, as inflation and exchange rates may have very differential impacts across social or producer groups as well as geographical locations.

Even more problematically, the discrepancy between negative (national deregulation) and positive integration (EU policies) is a weight on national policies. The successful expansion of EU law constitutes a serious constraint for national policy capacity. It reduces member states’ margin of action as their ability to propose policy alternatives is narrowing¹⁶. This, in turn, has an impact on national politics. In the same manner as for the EU level, we witness a shift on the state level toward a “polity without politics nor policies”, even if the pace of the shift is slower and the effects more diffuse and less visible.

We argue that the growth of right-wing populist movements across Europe, as well as a broader trend of opposition towards European integration, is partly due to this depoliticization effect. Peter Mair has delivered an elaborate explanation of the phenomenon: Mainstream parties focus on their governing function and thus act responsibly, which means that there is a growing programmatic convergence between what have formerly been the main left/right competitors within European party systems. This is due to the growing constraints on policy alternatives, as we have described above. This leaves a large space for contestation of what seems to be the uniform policies of governments of all partisan leanings, which is filled by populist parties, responsive to citizens’ increasing discontent¹⁷.

The imminent danger this constitutes for the European project is a challenge for Eurofriendly parties of both the left and the right. But it is even more problematic for social democracy, as the status quo that is favoured by the current system, is not neutral; it gives a bonus to neoliberal preferences. We do not say that the EU is by nature neoliberal, but simply that the current working of the system is not conducive to

¹³ F. Scharpf, *The asymmetry of European integration, or why the EU cannot be a Social Market Economy*, [in:] *Socio-Economic Review*, N°8(2), 2010, pp. 211-250. One classical example of an immensely difficult process of reform is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), while more recently, one could point to the stalled efforts of the Commission and a number of member states to establish a financial transaction tax.

¹⁴ G. Majone, *Regulating Europe*, Routledge London 1996.

¹⁵ A. Follesdal and S. Hix, *Why there is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik*, [in:] *Journal of Common Market Studies*, N°44(3), 2006, pp. 542-544; P. Genschel and M. Jachtenfuchs (eds.), *Beyond the Regulatory Polity? The European Integration of Core State Powers*, Oxford University Press 2013.

¹⁶ See also P. Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Verso London/New York, 2013, pp. 115-119.

¹⁷ P. Mair, *Representative versus Responsible Government*, MPIfG Working Paper, N°09/8, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies Cologne 2009; P. Mair, *Smaghi versus the Parties: Representative Government and Institutional Constraints*, [in:] A. Schäfer and W. Streeck (eds.), *Politics in the Age of Austerity*, Polity Press Cambridge 2013, pp. 143-168.

social-democratic goals. Social democracy is the political movement which is the most challenged by the European integration process¹⁸; at the same time, it is the one which can benefit the most from Europe if it proves able to reverse the systemic trend of depoliticization.

Strengthening Europarties: Challenges and a call for leadership

After the Treaty of Maastricht had first mentioned political parties at the European level, an EU regulation formally specified the concept of “Europarties” in 2003¹⁹, which was amended in 2007 in terms of funding rules for the parties and the then introduced legal basis for affiliated foundations.²⁰ Still, party engagement at the EU level goes back to earlier periods of European integration²¹. In the case of the social-democrats, the parties came together already in 1974 in the *Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community*, which became the *Party of European Socialists* (PES) in 1992²². Historically, Europarties have operated as forums for deliberation between national parties and, in particular, party leaders, rather than genuine parties that run election campaigns and define programmes²³. In recent years however, several developments give reason to believe that Europarties now assume roles that go beyond this function of coordination²⁴. While it is premature to speak of genuine political parties at the EU level²⁵, Europarties now assume more formal roles. In particular the establishment of party-affiliated think-tanks (‘Eurofoundations’)²⁶ has enhanced the sphere of transnational political dialogue. Additionally, the possibility to nominate pan-European candidates for the Presidency of the Commission introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon and exercised for the first time in the 2014 EP elections²⁷ and the adoption of a new European legal statute and more flexible budgetary

¹⁸ R. Ladrech, *Social Democracy and the Challenge of European Union*, Lynne Rienner Boulder 2000, chapter 3.

¹⁹ Regulation (EC) No 2004/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, [in:] Official Journal of the European Union, L29, 15/11/2003, pp. 1-4.

²⁰ Regulation (EC) N° 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2007 amending Regulation (EC) N° 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, [in:] Official Journal of the European Union, L343, 27/12/2007, pp. 5–8.

²¹ A. Skrzypek, *Ideology, politisation and identification*, [in:] E. Stetter, K. Duffek, and A. Skrzypek (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union - Europarties on the Rise*, Next Left Vol. 7, FEPS & Renner Institute Brussels/Vienna 2013, p. 29.

²² S. Hix and U. Lesse, *Shaping a Vision. A History of the Party of European Socialists*, 2002, available under: <http://urs-lesse.de/History_PES_EN.pdf>.

²³ C. R. A. De Prat, *Political Parties and European Integration*, P.I. E. Peter Lang Brussels 2009.

²⁴ K. M. Johansson and T. Raunio, *Regulating Europarties. Cross-Party Coalitions Capitalizing on Incomplete Contracts*, [in:] Party Politics, N°11(5), 2005, pp. 515-534.

²⁵ P. Mair, *Political parties and party systems*, [in:] P. Graziano and M. Vink (eds.), *Europeanization: New Research Agendas*, Palgrave Macmillan Basingstoke 2006, pp. 154-166.

²⁶ Regulation (EC) N° 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2007 amending Regulation (EC) N° 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, [in:] Official Journal of the European Union, L343, 27/12/2007, pp. 5–8.

²⁷ R. Baldoli, S. Gänzle and M. Shackleton, *Overthrowing Secrecy: The Spitzenkandidaten experiment and a new chance for a European party system*, The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) Commentary, 2014; S. B. Hobolt, *A vote for the President? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections*, [in:] Journal of European Public Policy, N°21(10), 2014, pp. 1528-1540.

rules²⁸ signify a process of formalisation. The changing role of Europarties also alludes to informal developments such as the ability to form bridges between the Commission, the EP and the Council,²⁹ the development of common party manifestos³⁰, the ability of national party members to actively participate at the EU level and the conduct of transnational thematic campaigns.

Political contestation and the consolidation of a progressive platform for Europe

Despite the institutional developments, scholars continue to disagree whether parties matter for political conflict at the EU level, that is, to what extent partisan disagreements can explain contestation of EU affairs, as opposed to factors such as national interests and identities. It has been suggested that the EU's political space is structured by a U-shaped relationship between the traditional 'left-right' dimension and a 'pro-anti integration' dimension^{31,32}. This implies that moderate parties in the centre of the left-right scale are prone to have positive attitudes towards the EU whereas extreme parties on either side of the political spectrum have more sceptical attitudes³³. This U-shape has been explained with reference to the domestic interest of peripheral political parties outside government to oppose European integration and the centrist nature of the EU as a political project³⁴.

In a well-known debate with Stefano Bartolini, Simon Hix has called for the strengthening of the left-right axis in EU-level competition between parties, which would at once democratize the European Union, lead to the possibility of proposing policy alternatives and thus enhance the EU's legitimacy³⁵. In a discussion of his claims, Magnette and Papadopoulos call for more caution, as they see a "need to demonstrate that a clarification of partisan oppositions at the EU level would trigger a realignment of national debates, so that the Council's discussions would reflect those of the EP" but assume that systems such as the EU rather "tend to preserve the lack of coordination between the two levels"³⁶. We

²⁸ European Commission, *Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations*, COM 499 (2012).

²⁹ S. Van Hecke, *Do transnational party federations matter? (... why should we care?)* [in:] *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, N°6(3), 2010, p. 407.

³⁰ C. R. A. de Prat, *Political Parties and European Integration*, P.I. E. Peter Lang Brussels 2009.

³¹ Political dimensions are based on the construction of a consensus that attitudes towards distinct matters (e.g. legalizing abortion, marijuana and same-sex marriage) are empirically related in the real world and can be scaled. Political dimensions can be regarded as the main lines of contestation between political parties. In national politics the left-right dimension has become the predominant dimension that defines political differences. See: K. Benoit and M. Laver, *The dimensionality of political space: Epistemological and methodological considerations*, [in:] *European Union Politics*, 13(2), 2012, p. 198.

³² The structure of conflict in the European Union as a political space has been one of the big questions in political science in the past two decades. See, for instance: S. Hix and C. Lord, *Political parties in the European Union*, St. Martin's Press New York 1997; A. Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe, Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*, Cornell University Press New York 1998; G. Tsebelis and G. Garrett, *Legislative Politics in the European Union*, *European Union Politics*, N°1(1), 2000, pp. 9-36; H. Kriesi, *Restructuration of Partisan Politics and the Emergence of a New Cleavage Based on Values*, [in:] *West European Politics* N°33(3), 2010, pp. 673-685.

³³ I. Manners and C. Sørensen, *New Political Contestation in the European Union*, DIIS Brief, 2007, pp. 1-7.

³⁴ L. Hooghe, G. Marks and C. J. Wilson, *Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?* [in:] *Comparative Political Studies*, N°35(8), 2002, pp. 965-989.

³⁵ S. Hix, *Why the EU Needs (Left-Right) Politics? Policy Reform and Accountability Are Impossible without It*, [in:] *Politics: The Right or the Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU?*, Policy Paper, N°19, Notre Europe Paris 2006.

³⁶ P. Magnette and Y. Papadopoulos, *On the politicization of the European consociation: A middle way between Hix and Bartolini*, *European Governance Papers (EUROGOV)*, N° C-08-01, 2008.

do not support this last claim, as the past years have seen a realignment of national debates. This realignment however has, as mentioned in the introduction, followed a trend of depoliticization, and also impacted negatively on the salience of the traditionally well established left-right cleavage in domestic politics.

In the face of this trend, political parties are important *especially at the European level* in developing more expanded arenas for contestation in the EU. We agree with Markus Jachtenfuchs and others who have suggested that parties are the most likely agents to propose legitimate and detailed normative ideas about a legitimate political order in Europe³⁷. The ability of Europarties to mediate between EU institutions and their increasingly formalised role have enhanced their capacity to build transnational coalitions and to expand party contestation over EU policies and politics³⁸.

It would be misguided, however, to suggest that a successful Europarty system can only be achieved through institutional engineering and gradual changes to Europarty statutes or budgets. Europarties need to deliver normative visions for Europe that are clear enough for citizens to understand and to show that party contestation in the EU matters. One way of doing so is for Europarties to develop and follow up on political campaigns at the EU-level. The PES campaign for a Financial Transaction Tax (FTT) provides a good example of how the PES has succeeded in agreeing on and pushing for a common campaign. In order to persuade European voters that such campaigns matter, such issues need to be pushed and translated into tangible decisions and implementation if the European progressive party platform is to be successful in the future.

The challenges ahead: Deepening and widening the Europarty system

For a meaningful politicisation of the EU political system to occur, a further development of Europarties within a more consolidated Europarty system is an utmost priority. We identify two main challenges in this respect. We see the social-democratic family as the actual or potential driving force on both dimensions, but also want to stress that our considerations pertain to all other party families.

One challenge is related to the ‘deepening’ or ‘vertical integration’ of Europarties. Here we view it as necessary to push national parties, including their members and leaders, to engage and consider EU politics as a salient issue. The argument that the EU is an ‘upside-down polity’ (meaning that the prestige of comparable political offices is usually higher at the national than at the EU-level) constitutes a serious barrier to committing parties at the national level to engage in EU politics and parties³⁹. Only by creating a link between the local branches and activists, the national leadership and central party institutions, and the Europarty level (including the European parliamentary groups, the European party federations and the Eurofoundations) can the EU become a visible topic within all realms of party life.

³⁷ M. Jachtenfuchs, T. Diez and S. Jung, *Which Europe? Conflicting Models of a Legitimate European Political Order*, [in:] *European Journal of International Relations*, N°4(4), 1998, p. 414.

³⁸ S. Day, *Between ‘Containment’ and ‘Transnationalisation’*. *Where next for Europarties?* [in:] *Acta Politica*, N°49(1), 2014, pp. 5-29.

³⁹ S. Hix, *Towards a partisan theory of EU politics*, [in:] *Journal of European Public Policy*, N°15(8), 2008, pp. 1254-1265.

Another challenge pertains to ‘widening’ the representativeness of Europarties across member states and party-political *familles spirituelles*⁴⁰. This point concerns the ‘horizontal integration’ of the Europarty system. Although some party groups, including the PES, have national member parties from all or nearly all member states, the representativeness of other Europarties, such as the European People’s Party (EPP) where the British Conservatives are not members, or the European Green Party (EGP), is more limited. In addition, party groups at the fringes of the political spectrum, such as the Party of the European Left (EL) or the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR) do indeed also maintain European structures and EP groups, but do not fully commit to the idea of an integrated European political space.

The challenges in widening the scope of Europarties is reflected in the aforementioned decision to establish Eurofoundations made up of national party-affiliated think tanks as members, in 2007⁴¹. The decision was partly based on the intention of German political parties and foundations to transpose the German model characterised by independent political foundations to the EU and to build a European demos⁴². The idea of competing, political Eurofoundations was opposed by a British network that favoured a ‘multi-party’ approach to the EU based on consensual positions on “low” politics issues such as human rights⁴³. The different national levels of engagement in Europarties and Eurofoundations echo existing research that has portrayed Germany as a case where the EU is discursively used to overcome the past, while the UK tends to construct the EU in opposition to their understanding of the (British) nation⁴⁴.

This is linked to the more general challenge of accommodating different national narratives towards European integration⁴⁵ as well as heterogeneous political economies⁴⁶. The variation is also reflected in continued programmatic differences even within the established European party families⁴⁷. This constitutes the underlying challenge in creating a Europarty system, one that in turn ought to be tackled through the improvement of Europarty structures, the stronger inclusion of grassroots activists and the development of European programmes by the respective Eurofoundations.

⁴⁰ N. Timus and S. Lightfoot, *Special Issue: Europarties between ‘deepening’ and ‘widening’* [in:] Acta Politica, N°49(1), 2014, pp. 1-4.

⁴¹ Regulation (EC) N° 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2007 amending Regulation (EC) N° 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, [in:] Official Journal of the European Union. Official Journal of the European Union, L343, 27/12/2007, pp. 5–8.

⁴² J. D. Kelstrup, *Think Tanks in Europe: Explaining their Development and Variation in Germany, the United Kingdom, Denmark and at the EU-level*, Roskilde University 2014, p. 128.

⁴³ D. Dakowska, *Networks of Foundations and Norm Entrepreneurs: Between Politics and Policies in EU Decision-making*, [in:] Journal of Public Policy, N°29(2), 2009, pp. 201-221.

⁴⁴ T. Risse, *Social Constructivism and European Integration*, [in:] T. Diez and A. Wiener (eds.), *European Integration Theory*, Oxford University Press New York 2009.

⁴⁵ J. Diez Medrano, *Framing Europe: Attitudes to European Integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom*, Princeton University Press 2003.

⁴⁶ M. Höpner and A. Schäfer, *Integration among Unequals: How the Heterogeneity of European Varieties of Capitalism Shapes the Social and Democratic Potential of the EU*, MPIfG Discussion Paper N°12/5, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies Cologne 2012.

⁴⁷ E. Sigalas and J. Pollak, *Political Parties at the European Level: Do They Satisfy the Condition of Programmatic Convergence?*, [in:] S. Kröger and D. Friedrich (eds.), *The Challenge of Democratic Representation in the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan Basingstoke 2012, pp. 23-40.

Deepening the Europarty System: Cooperation mechanisms as a building block for progressive Europolitics

As the previous section has highlighted, the emergence of a European progressive platform presupposes efforts geared at widening, deepening and establishing leadership of Europarties. In this section the challenge of deepening is addressed by proposing to reinforce cooperation among parties as a building block for the politicisation of EU. In that respect, concrete steps of engagement, trust and capacity building with national constituencies are discussed in three fields: the establishment of coordination structures, the pooling and sharing of resources and investment in systems, IT and the new social media. Thus, the Europeanisation of national political parties can be advanced both through a socialisation as well as the use of ICT tools.

The literature on the rise of Europarties, policy think tanks and their influence in EU decision making has been growing. However, despite notable exceptions⁴⁸, the effects of Europeanisation on parties have been studied more extensively at the EU level, while the interface between national and European parties has not enjoyed a balanced, in depth coverage across the EU. As efforts of constituting a more advanced scheme of European party cooperation take hold, overcoming cultural and institutional barriers at the domestic level is a key factor for an increase of the institutional clout of Europarties. Based on conceptualisations of Europeanisation⁴⁹ as both bottom up and top down (politicisation and socialisation), one can draw on existing cases of interaction on the ground to identify possible fields of cooperation/competition. These fields are explored here as a pilot reference for future in depth case studies.

Three fields of cooperation

Establishment of coordination structures

Existing Europarty structures, including Eurofoundations, already have a circumstantial presence in domestic politics, especially in EP election years. However, a pan-European progressive sphere presupposes more permanent structures and deeper forms of cooperation. Besides the practical advantages of establishing liaison offices, organizational structures at regional and/or city level offer structures of meaning which embed the ownership of a progressive agenda for Europe in local constituencies and civil society. As regards Eurofoundations, the model of national policy think tanks that operate offices in a number of member state capitals deserves more attention in order to derive best practices. The feasibility of closer integration of such branches within the Eurofoundations as umbrella structures is a valid issue for investigation.

⁴⁸ R. Ladrech, *Europeanization and political parties*, [in:] Living Reviews in European Governance, N°4(1), 2009.

⁴⁹ Europeanization is interpreted as: "Processes of [...] construction, diffusion, and institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms which are [...] incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies", see C. Radaelli, *The Europeanization of Public Policy*, [in:] K. Featherstone and C. Radaelli (eds.), *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford University Press 2003, pp. 27-56.

Likewise, enhanced forms of coordination that would provide a European rather than inter-state form of cooperation should be explored. In this regard, a broad progressive alliance at the European level consisting of representatives across the EU may be a key factor in instigating gradual reform. However, developing domestic level structures on behalf of Europarties and affiliated foundations, where they do not exist, is constrained by several factors which we discuss in the following.

A particular question is how party networks can become operational at a time of growing anti-party sentiment and a quasi-permanent "fiscal regime of austerity", limiting the parties' scope for any policy shifts and persuasive political contestation.⁵⁰ In countries under financial adjustment programmes, where very tight fiscal constraints limit discretion of budget execution and public investment is confined to EU budgetary transfers, a credible economic recovery narrative cannot emerge from domestic structures in the short to medium term. As Ladrech notes: "The EU is now explicitly a part of the domestic political landscape. The danger is that there is an absence of a national context to argue the merits of financial and economic rescue plans, apart from a general rejection and this plays into the hands of extremists".⁵¹ While a more direct presence and involvement of Europarties may be a step towards a more democratic EU, it may also result in resurged attempts at supranational scapegoating as one of the few means of contestation in a context of policy discretion severely restricted by multiple conditionalities. The shrinking of policy space available to parties however is not confined to countries in bail-out programmes, but effectively applies to all member-states subject to the euro area economic governance rules, and, as we have seen this also relates to the more general observation that alternative partisan programmes on economic issues become less meaningful in a global economy with open financial markets and international trade rules, in particular within a regime such as the European Single Market⁵².

In any case, the gradual empowerment of Europarties requires concrete steps of further organisational consolidation and grassroots mobilisation that is conducive to the 'deepening' of Europarty structures. Here, the PES serves as a good case for illustration: in the May 2014 EP elections, PES resources provided enclaves of European issue campaigning against the enduring dominance of domestic affairs discourse across the EU. For instance, the PES activists, a network founded in 2005⁵³ bringing together Europe enthusiasts from PES member parties, has strengthened the legitimacy of the top candidate procedure through bottom-up deliberation. Furthermore, the "knock the vote" campaign sent a distinctive signal of a democratically constituted campaign, in stark contrast with overreliance on public relations firms by other Europarties. However, despite the relative strengths of this approach, further capacity building and gap filling is required as a basis for wide-reaching Europarty campaigning. A survey of PES activists

⁵⁰ P. Pierson, *Coping with permanent austerity: welfare state restructuring in affluent democracies* [in:] Id. (ed.), *The New Politics of the Welfare State*, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 410-456.

⁵¹ R. Ladrech, *Economic Crisis, Democratic Legitimacy: Transnational parties as a potential bridge between Member States and the EU*, [in:] E. Stetter, K. Duffek and A. Skrzypek (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union - Europarties on the Rise, Next Left Vol. 7*, FEPS & Renner Institute Brussels/Vienna 2013, p. 85.

⁵² R. Rose, *Responsible Party Government in a World of Interdependence*, [in:] *West European Politics*, N°37(2), 2014, pp. 253-269.

⁵³ I. Hertner, *Running the show? Europarty members as election campaigners for the Party of European Socialists and the European Green Party* [in:] E. Stetter, K. Duffek and A. Skrzypek (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union - Europarties on the Rise, Next Left Vol. 7*, FEPS & Renner Institute Brussels/Vienna 2013, p. 147.

provided qualitative data on the sociological background of the activists. The activists who identify themselves as a linkage between national, subnational and EU parties overwhelmingly have transnational experiences in EU countries and express concrete visions for the future of Europe. However respondents identified structural issues, limited allocated resources, and power consolidation considerations of national actors as impediments to the further mobilisation of the network⁵⁴. In addition, an evaluation of the 'PES activists initiative' as instrument of intra-party democracy established in 2010 deserves research attention⁵⁵. The further development of the fledgling network of PES activists also provides a strand for in depth organizational research. In that respect, examples can be drawn from best practices within political parties as well as from a careful consideration of the horizontal debates in social movements. Finally, the causal link between the absence of European campaigning in specific member states and a high Eurosceptic vote also deserves further empirical investigation.

Direct Europarty membership

An issue of salience, already addressed by researchers⁵⁶, is whether membership in Europarties should be more similar to that of national parties, indirect through national parties or separate from them. The latter case constitutes a bold step towards further enhancing the democratic legitimacy of Europarties⁵⁷ but is one that may incite domestic opposition. A system of parallel or indirect membership, based on the current approach, builds on the linkages between existing structures. However, efforts at expanding the appeal of such schemes may be negatively affected by the tarnished image of national parties in an environment of low citizen interest in politics and low voter turnout. Therefore, it appears to us that direct membership of Europarties could be a historic decision towards strengthening democratic legitimacy and ensuring debate on European issues at all times throughout the legislative period.

Furthermore, a less rigid approach to membership in Europarties can appeal to a wider constituency⁵⁸ and potential activist base in times of increasing liquidity and multiplicity of citizen identities. This approach could thus counteract the the cartelisation of parties and the alienation from and shrinking of the party on the ground⁵⁹.

Investing in communication channels

The development of an institutional discourse between political actors and the public is essential for the gradual construction of a wider scope and impact of Europarties on EU policies. Informative in this

⁵⁴ A. Bargas and J. Le Deroff, *Survey on PES Activists*, Note N°2, EuroCité, le think tank européen progressiste, 2012.

⁵⁵ Party of European Socialists, *PES Activists initiative, adopted by the PES Presidency 4th February 2010*, Brussels 2010.

⁵⁶ I. Hertner, *Running the show? Europarty members as election campaigners for the Party of European Socialists and the European Green Party* [in:] E. Stetter, K. Duffek and A. Skrzypek (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union - Europarties on the Rise, Next Left Vol. 7*, FEPS & Renner Institute Brussels/Vienna 2013, p. 147.

⁵⁷ See also Foundation for European Progressive Studies, *10 observations on the outcomes of the 2014 European elections*, Brussels, 28 May 2014.

⁵⁸ S. Borrás and G. Peters, *The Lisbon Strategy's empowerment of core executives: centralizing and politicizing EU national coordination*, [in:] *Journal of European Public Policy* N°18(4), 2011, pp. 525-545.

⁵⁹ I. Van Biezen, P. Mair et al., *Going, going, . . . gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe*, [in:] *European Journal of Political Research*, N°51(1), 2012, pp. 24-56.

regard is Schmidt's discursive institutionalist⁶⁰ approach on the basis of a "logic of communication", which shows that two types of institutional discourse can be developed, a coordinative discourse among policy actors, which is more common in compound polities, and communicative discourse between political actors and the public that is more frequent in simple polities. As Habermas argues in a similar fashion, the development of a transnational European democracy, presupposes the opening up of national public spheres and civic solidarity of European people with each other⁶¹. However, this invites the basic question of how ordinary citizens can grasp the intricacies of policies⁶², let alone the additional complexity of EU policies. One answer would be that national citizens realise the consequences of EU political action either through the national media and enhanced role of the EP in the legislative procedure, as Habermas proposes. Alternatively, this may be achieved through strengthening linkages of subnational and local politics with the EU level by developing EU specialist locality-based political institutions.⁶³ Thus the process of multi-level governance would be reinvigorated and the critique of a Faustian bargain with democracy refuted⁶⁴.

Particular communication tools are identified below. IT systems and new social media constitute a particular field where cooperation among national and EU level political parties, foundations, civil society and individuals encounters favourable conditions. Enhancing current online networking platforms such as members networks can provide a critical mass of IT literate (mostly young) online supporters of a European progressive agenda⁶⁵. However, a more inclusive approach would require language barriers to be overcome (for instance by developing basic content in all official languages). Another obstacle is the gap between more and less IT-developed areas that may undermine equal participation across the EU.

In addition, national gatekeeping efforts⁶⁶ of restricting or selective channelling information on EU affairs pose a risk that may result in clashes between domestic and EU actors over the use of IT instruments. The case of EU specialised staff in national parties is informative in this regard. As Ladrech notes, such positions have been created in order to limit transaction costs with transnational parties and EP delegations, but often lack decision making powers⁶⁷. In addition, party actors came to realise the merits of allowing this organisational change only after an environmental shock, such as an acceleration of integration or an institutional crisis. Nevertheless, Poguntke, Aylott *et al.*⁶⁸ consider party EU experts

⁶⁰ V. Schmidt, *Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism'*, [in:] *European Political Science Review*, N°2(1), 2010, pp. 1-25.

⁶¹ J. Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*, Polity Press Cambridge 2012, pp. 46-48.

⁶² J. S. Mill, *On Representative Government* (4th ed., A.D. Lindsay), Dent London 1960 [1861].

⁶³ A. Bielskis, *Anti-Capitalist Politics and Labour for the Twenty-first Century: History and Future Challenges*, [in:] A. Bielskis and K. Knight (eds.), *Virtue and Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*, Ashgate Farnham 2015, pp. 229-248.

⁶⁴ See G. B. Peters and J. Pierre, *Multi-level Governance and Democracy, A Faustian bargain*, [in:] I. Bache and M. Flinders (eds.), *Multi-level Governance*, Oxford University Press 2004, pp. 75-89.

⁶⁵ R. K. Gibson, *Party Change, Social Media and the Rise of 'Citizen-initiated' campaigning*, [in:] *Party Politics*, N°21(2), 2015, p. 183-197.

⁶⁶ G. Moschonas, *One Step Forward, One Step Back? Debt Crisis, the PES, and the Limits of Social Democracy*, [in:] E. Stetter, K. Duffek and A. Skrzypek (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union - Europarties on the Rise, Next Left Vol. 7*, FEPS & Renner Institute Brussels/Vienna 2013, p. 132.

⁶⁷ R. Ladrech, *Party Change and Europeanisation: Elements of an Integrated Approach*, [in:] *West European Politics*, N°35(3), 2012, pp. 574-588.

⁶⁸ T. Poguntke, N. Aylott, et al., *The Europeanisation of national party organisations: A conceptual analysis* [in:] *European Journal of Political Research*, N°46(6), 2007, p. 766.

especially those involved in EU decision making among the winners of Europeanisation, with the party on the ground and ideological loyalists counting as losers. The spread of new social media has the potential of bypassing traditional national policy and media networks, thus opening a new field of contestation. Despite possible advantages and disadvantages, recasting affiliations is a long-term process of cultural change that would require a holistic approach from the Europarties, of which social media communication is but one pillar while other pillars include embracing the pro-Europeanist discourse of civil society, academia and associational organisations.

The question of "political will"⁶⁹ hampers efforts to consolidate and deepen Europarty coordination structures and cooperation mechanisms with the national level. Yet, despite Eurosceptic gatekeeping and information bottlenecks, a winning European social-democratic agenda requires efforts of capacity building and coordination at the national level as well, by more autonomous, democratic and participatory Europarties. Politicisation along the left-right axis may encounter additional difficulties in recession and unemployment-ridden economies facing extreme citizen dissatisfaction with politics. Nevertheless, embryonic Europartisanship structures seem to have worked even in the hostile political environment of the 2014 EP elections. A possible lesson that can be drawn is that in the current state of affairs, delivering a progressive agenda requires smooth interactions between all tiers of EU governance and that deviation at any of the levels may undermine manifestations of European political unity as the basis of a new progressive alliance.

Widening the System: Building a European left-wing coalition

The top-candidate: a first step in a new path?

Before the last European elections, it was already likely that the nominee for the new Commission presidency would be one of the top candidates chosen by the major Europarties (EPP and PES). After the elections and some controversial debate, the European Council decided to support Jean-Claude Juncker as the candidate of the European Peoples' Party (EPP) that came out of the election as strongest EP party group. The approval of this nomination by the European Parliament closed the circle. How can we interpret this political process?

First of all, the top-candidate game could be framed as an attempt to enhance the legitimacy of the Commission by establishing a symbolic link between the voters and the head of this institution. Through that, a boost in the electoral turnout, regularly declining since 1979, was expected. Secondly, it could be read as a first step on a path leading to a political empowerment of EU institutions on the basis of an adversarial dynamic⁷⁰. The challenge set by the first framing cannot be considered as achieved, since the turnout lowered again, reaching 42,5%. The latter reading, which entails a politicization of the EU, is more difficult to assess and needs to be seriously addressed in a long-term perspective. Otherwise the

⁶⁹ A. Skrzypek, *Ideology, politisation and identification*, [in:] E. Stetter, K. Duffek, and A. Skrzypek (eds.), *In the Name of Political Union - Europarties on the Rise, Next Left Vol. 7*, FEPS & Renner Institute Brussels/Vienna 2013, p. 30.

⁷⁰ L. Caroli, N. Genga, A. Imbernon and I. Stănescu, *Towards a new European polity? Social Democrats and the 2014 EP elections*, FEPS YAN, Third cycle, 2014.

top-candidate initiative might look as a disposable expedient, adopted hastily before getting back to “business as usual”.

In the current framework, this new way of appointing the Commission President corresponds to a plurality logic (*first-past-the-post*) and clashes with a parliament expressing a polarized pluralism⁷¹, thus creating a contradiction between electoral and institutional patterns of “normal” democracies. Those elements being mutually incompatible and incongruent, the investiture of the top candidate could only work thanks to a consensual logic based on the convergence of the “core”⁷² Europhile political groups (S&D, EPP, ALDE). Hence we conclude that the real change obtained by the top-candidate has more to do with a personalization of the grand coalition model, than with politicizing and making the EU system more accountable.

Moreover, the procedure was not enough to stem the populist wave, which seems to feed itself from popular discontent with this very consensual logic. In fact, in the 2014 EP elections on 25 May, the ‘hard’ Eurosceptic forces managed to increase their presence in the European Parliament, thus creating an obstacle for social democrats and other EU-friendly groups. In France, the National Front led by Marine Le Pen obtained the first place with an outstanding 25%, while Nigel Farage’s UKIP won a British nationwide election for the first time ever, with 26.8% of the vote and 24 seats. In Italy Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement (M5S) got the 21.2% and 17 seats. The EFDD group (Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy), which includes UKIP and M5S, found its number of seats increased from 32 to 48. A considerable segment of the 52 “Non-Attached” MEPs belongs to Marine Le Pen’s party. The real success for the hard Eurosceptics, however, is the possibility to overturn the top candidate logic by blaming the mainstream EP groups for their “consensus democracy” behaviour, represented as a sort of collusion against “the people”.

The large electoral gains by Eurosceptics also mean that the democratic legitimacy of the eventually successful Juncker candidature is called into question: many citizens have voted for parties that have not participated in and often actively rejected the procedure of the pan-European campaigns. The case of the United Kingdom complicates this picture further: As the main party of the centre-right, the Conservative Party, is not a member of the EPP, there was no list on the ballot that would make it even possible to vote for Juncker. On the other side, also the British Labour Party did not make any efforts in supporting Martin Schulz as the common PES candidate. This points to the need of a ‘widening’ of the emerging Europarty system beyond the confines of the Europhile core, both in terms of member states as well party families. One element of the 2014 campaign stands out positively in this regard, namely the fielding of European top-candidates by the European Greens and the Party of the European Left (corresponding EP group: GUE/NGL).

The subsequent management of Europe’s crises corroborates the structural depoliticisation trend. Recent scholarly work operationalises politicisation by disaggregating it to component elements of salience of European governance, polarisation of opinion, and expansion of actors and audiences

⁷¹ G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, Cambridge University Press 1976.

⁷² See L. Thorlakson, *Federalism and the European party system*, [in:] *Journal of European Public Policy*, N°12(3), 2005, p. 475, who refers to the “system core” concept used in G. Smith, *Core persistence: change and the “People’s Party”*, in P. Mair and G. Smith (eds.), *Understanding Party System Change in Western Europe*, London Frank Cass 1990, p. 161.

engaged⁷³. However, EU level politicisation has been limited to EU institutional actors' attempts at framing and containment of debates within the integration anti-integration dichotomy and shied away from the left-right axis. For instance, a juxtaposition of the alternating and polarising televised addresses by EU officials on one hand and Tsipras on the other, in the controversial 2015 Greek bailout referendum, indicates an attempted framing of the debate as a vote on polity as opposed to Tsipras's framing the no vote in populist and anti-austerity terms.

In addition, similar patterns can be found in the UK, where the incumbent Conservatives frame the 2017 UK referendum on Europe as an in or out polity question having already capitalised on the polarising surge of nationalism on both sides of the Scotland-England border following the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. However most of the recent cases of politicisation through polarisation produced no effects other than perpetuating the status quo and the concomitant stagnation of European integration. The rejection of solidarity to the periphery has been justified by recourse to the "pseudo-depoliticised" technical jargon of implementation, invocation of the "no alternative" thesis and the dogmatic adherence to a perceived "Pareto optimality"⁷⁴ of pursued policies. By crowding out critical dissident voices and promoting the "ahistorical analysis and individualist atomisation of EU affairs", established views deprive EU politics from the revitalising effects of controversy and deliberation⁷⁵.

We dedicate the remainder of this paper to a reflection on the potential this holds for the development for EU-level left-wing alliances.

Shifting to another coalition pattern

Assuming that the odd couple "Europhile core" and "Eurosceptical challengers" is more preferable for European democracy than a politically oriented contrast along a right-left cleavage seems questionable. All the more as nowadays "the view that the EU's policy decisions can be legitimized by a sum of national legitimacies transmitted through intergovernmental institutions is showing its limits"⁷⁶. In general, the vertices of the "policy-politics-polity" triangle stand better together if within the *polity* a *politics* logic works throughout a competition between different *policy* options.

To become a nation-state like democracy, the EU would require party pluralism, that is "a working party system in which parties operate and interact with respect to their mutual roles (i.e. government and opposition)"⁷⁷. For this simple reason Europarties should seek "further consolidation and hence building

⁷³ P. de Wilde, A. Leupold and H. Schmidtke, *Introduction: the differentiated politicisation of European governance*, [in:] West European Politics, N°39(1), 2016, p. 4.

⁷⁴ G. Majone, *Europe's "Democratic Deficit": The Question of Standards*, [in:] European Law Journal, N°4(1), 1998, pp. 5–28.

⁷⁵ I. Manners and R. Whitman, *Another Theory is Possible: Dissident Voices in Theorising Europe*, [in:] Journal of Common Market Studies, N°54(1), 2016, pp. 3–18.

⁷⁶ L. Bardi, *Parties, Party System and Party Government in the European Union*, [in:] *Democratic Legitimacy and Political Leadership in the European Union. Towards the 2014 European Elections*, Fondazione Italianeuropei & FEPS Roma/Brussels 2013, p. 29.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

capacity towards becoming actors within a competitive euro-partisan system”⁷⁸. These latter ones should, as we have argued above, enforce their vertical relationship with civil society and local constituencies. On the other hand, a different model of horizontal relationships among political families has to be hypothesized. Indeed, the diverse reality of contemporary democracies shows us that a two-party system perspective is neither an advantageous nor an always feasible option, especially with incongruous and heterogeneous party systems and divided societies like the European ones. Therefore, the only desirable option for European social democrats to shift from a collusion to a competition model is represented by the construction of a left or centre-left coalition.

After all, the left-right dimension has been relevant in Europarties’ manifestos for several decades. In 1978, David Marquand asserted that the only possibility for a pan-European polity to be really democratic was linked to a shift “from a ‘Europe des patries’ [...] structured around national identities and governments, to a ‘Europe des partis’”⁷⁹. In this framework, parties need to compete for office and to define policies instead of forming grand coalitions. If they really intend “to translate citizens’ policy preferences in the domestic arena into policy actions at the European level, and to build functional rather than territorial majorities, this competition would need to be along left–right lines rather than between ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ Europe positions”⁸⁰. Sometimes, indeed, “the lack of a party discourse that is partisan oriented with regard to the EU policy domain also means that euro-sceptic parties are often able to set the terms of debate when the EU does become a salient issue in a member state’s political space”⁸¹.

If we accept the need for left-right politicisation, we arrive at the empirical question of the balance and the dynamics in terms of EP seats distribution along party-political lines. In fact, in the long cycle of eight elections held since 1979, the pro- vs. anti-Europe axis did not move in a significant way. As one can see in tables 1 and 2, the balance of the total share of seats won by the “core” groups (including PES, EPP, ALDE) and the “non-core” moved by 0.2-0.4 points (in rounded numbers). Looking at the dynamics of the seat share won by the “two main parties” (PES, EPP, table 3) a slightly larger increase can be noticed (+1.1%), but its present total amounts to a proportion (54.8%) unfit to envisage a two-party system.

⁷⁸ A. Skrzypek, *Unleashing Competitive Spirit. The Role of Europarties in Politicizing Europe*, [in:] *Democratic Legitimacy and Political Leadership in the European Union. Towards the 2014 European Elections*, Fondazione Italianeuropei & FEPS Roma/Brussels 2013, p. 56.

⁷⁹ D. Marquand, *Towards a Europe of the Parties*, [in:] *Political Quarterly*, N°49(4), 1978, pp. 425-445. Cit. in S. Hix, A. Kreppel and A. Noury, *The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive?* [in:] *Journal of Common Market Studies*, N°41(2), 2003, p. 310.

⁸⁰ S. Hix, A. Kreppel and A. Noury, *The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive?* [in:] *Journal of Common Market Studies*, N°41(2), 2003, p. 310. See also S. Hix, *Parties at the European Level and the Legitimacy of EU Socio-Economic Policy*, [in:] *Journal of Common Market Studies*, N°33(4), 1995, pp. 527-554; S. Hix, *Dimensions and Alignments in European Union Politics: Cognitive Constraints and Partisan Responses*, [in:] *European Journal of Political Research*, N3°5(1), 1999, pp. 69-106.

⁸¹ R. Ladrech, *National Political Parties and European Governance: The Consequences of “Missing in Action”*, [in:] *West European Politics*, N°30(5), 2007, p. 957.

Table 1

Share of seats of ‘core parties’ political groups in the EP 1979-2014

	PES	EPP	ALDE	TOT
1979	27.6	26.1	9.8	63.5
1984	30.0	25.3	7.1	62.4
1989	34.7	23.4	9.5	67.6
1994	34.9	32.5*	10.9	73.5
1999	28.8	37.2	8.0	74.0
2004	27.3	36.6	12.0	75.9
2009	25.0	36.1	11.4	72.5
2014	25.4	29.4	8.9	63.7

*With CCD (Conservatives and Christian democrats)

Source: europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm

Table 2

Share of seats of ‘non-core parties’ political groups in the European Parliament 1979-2014⁸²

	GUE	GE	ARE	ECR	NC	ES	FRN	CDI	NI	TOT
1979	10.7	-	-	15.6	5.4	-	-	2.7	2.2	36.6
1984	9.4	-	4.6	11.5	6.7	-	3.7	-	1.6	37.5
1989	8.1	5.8	2.5	6.6	3.9	-	3.3	-	2.3	32.5
1994	4.9	4.1	-	-	4.6	3.4	-	-	4.8	21.8
1999	6.7	7.7	-	-	5.0	2.6	-	-	4.2	26.2
2004	5.6	5.7	-	-	3.7	5.1	-	-	4.0	24.1
2009	4.8	7.5	-	7.2	-	4.3	-	-	3.7	27.5
2014	6.9	6.7	-	9.3	-	6.4	-	-	6.9	36.2

Source: europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm

⁸² Legend: GUE (communists and left wing), PES (socialists, social-democrats and allies), EPP (conservatives, Christian democrats and allies), CCD (conservatives and Christian democrats), ECR (European conservatives and reformists), ALDE (liberals and centrists), NC (national conservatives), ARE (Regionalists and ecologists), GE (greens), CDI (heterogenous), NI (non-inscripts), ES (euro-sceptics), FRN (far right).

Table 3

Share of seats of the 'two main parties' political groups in the EP 1979-2014			
	PES	EPP	TOT
1979	27.6	26.1	53.7
1984	30.0	25.3	55.3
1989	34.7	23.4	58.1
1994	34.9	32.5*	67.4
1999	28.8	37.2	66.0
2004	27.3	36.6	63.9
2009	25.0	36.1	61.1
2014	25.4	29.4	54.8

Source: europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm

In parallel, we can observe the shares of centre-left (table 4) and centre-right (table 5) blocs. It is true that over the past 35 years the overall share of seats held by social democrats, greens, and the radical left did not grow in a considerable way (+0,7), but in the same period the centre-right groups lost almost 4 percentage points, which is a more significant proportion. In 2014, the six groups that might represent the two blocs in a potentially bi-polar parliament together amount to 86.6% of all MEPs. To be sure, political families often considered as 'soft' Eurosceptical (GUE, ECR) are taken into account in our hypothetical coalitions.

Table 4

Share of seats of 'centre-Left parties' political groups in the EP 1979-2014				
	PES	GE	GUE	TOT
1979	27.6	-	10.7	38.3
1984	30.0	-	9.4	39.4
1989	34.7	5.8	8.1	48.6
1994	34.9	4.1	4.9	43.9
1999	28.8	7.7	6.7	43.2
2004	27.3	5.7	5.6	38.6
2009	25.0	7.5	4.8	37.3
2014	25.4	6.7	6.9	39.0

Source: europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm

Table 5

Share of seats of ‘centre-right parties’ political groups in the European Parliament 1979-2014

	EPP	ALDE	ECR	TOT
1979	26.1	9.8	15.6	51.5
1984	25.3	7.1	11.5	43.9
1989	23.4	9.5	6.6	39.5
1994	32.5	10.9	-	43.4
1999	37.2	8.0	-	45.2
2004	36.6	12.0	-	48.6
2009	36.1	11.4	7.2	54.7
2014	29.4	8.9	9.3	47.6

Source: europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm

Focusing on the centre-left groups, it is noteworthy that since 1979 they have been progressively multiplying their territorial representativeness in terms of national delegations. The S&D from 9 to 28, the Greens from 2 (in 1984) to 17, the Radical Left (formerly Communists) from 3 to 14⁸³. Focusing on Europarties properly, and not parliamentary groups, one can underline that the PES and the European Greens hold national members from all EU States, while the European Left can count on the still significant number of 18 affiliates. We thus see that the ‘widening’ of the Europarty system has already occurred on the left of the political spectrum. From this perspective, the fostering of a strong left within a genuine Europarty system seems to be possible and the most promising path towards an alternative strategy for Europe.

Objections and opportunities: for an agonistic pluralism

There are obvious objections to our reasoning. To begin with, there is no “confidence link” between EP and the Commission, even with this new way of appointing the president of the Commission. And it is evident that “EU executive institutions and positions are not party based”⁸⁴ for the time being. Moreover, there are problems with the congruence of party-systems and heterogeneity of social-political cleavages. These latter ones sometimes do not cut across territorial conflicts⁸⁵. The coherence and common political will of Europarties are also points to be questioned⁸⁶. Finally, the coalition patters in the European Parliament are less stable than in national systems, as they are more dependent on the

⁸³ Source : <<http://www.europe-politique.eu>>.

⁸⁴ L. Bardi, *Parties, Party System and Party Government in the European Union*, [in:] *Democratic Legitimacy and Political Leadership in the European Union. Towards the 2014 European Elections*, Fondazione Italianeuropei & FEPS Roma/Brussels 2013, p. 34.

⁸⁵ L. Thorlakson, *Federalism and the European party system*, [in:] *Journal of European Public Policy*, N°12(3), 2005, pp. 470-471.

⁸⁶ For a rather optimistic view on the question of ideological coherence, drawing on the current empirical situation, see E. Bressanelli, *Mapping the ideological development of the Europarties*, [in:] F. Müller-Rommel and F. Casal Bértoa (eds.), *Party Politics and Democracy in Europe: Essays in honour of Peter Mair*, Palgrave Routledge London/New York 2016, pp. 162-177.

specific issues at stake⁸⁷. This means that even today, there are varying issue-based voting coalitions, which calls into question the general possibility of forming stable and coherent coalitions over a longer time period. All these objections need to be taken into account. However, in an emerging polity with great transformative power such as the EU, it is necessary to identify limits, constraints and payoffs, as well as to explore possibilities and opportunities⁸⁸.

The main objection regards the grand coalition as a better-fit model to mirror the balance between centre-left and centre-right governments ruling the member states and appointing their representatives as commissioners. Even though a candidate for Commission president has a majority in the EP, the Council party-political composition might still not be in favour of this candidate and his political programme. Thus, for instance, any possible centre-left majority in Parliament would clash with the intergovernmental reality, which is more centred. While this is undeniable, it is also true that a EP majority outcome for a progressive coalition would be only achieved in a particularly favourable momentum for centre-left parties across Europe. Hence, it is likely that this would happen at a time when a larger number of progressive governments are in office, rather than during periods with a left-right balance in the European Council.

As regards the internal cohesion of actors involved, von Beyme's statement that "*the image of parties acting as monolithic units is a fiction which cannot be sustained*"⁸⁹ is true not only for European, but also national politics. In a political science perspective, the real point is not whether parties are unitary actors or not, but whether they behave as if they were so.

In the matter of coalition suitability of some particular actors, experience tells us that there is not any essential and everlasting obstacle. By analysing the performances of the green parties in Western Europe Peter Mair acknowledged that they had become mainstream and acceptable for coalitions, a factor which has had consequences in coalition formation and a reinforcement of bipolarity⁹⁰. French, German and Italian political systems, to mention the most visible cases, have shown some examples of this kind of coalition in the recent past.

Social democrats on the one hand, greens and leftists on the other, have mutual incentives in forming coalitions. The former can increase their probability of being the main parties in the EP, as senior partner in a coalition which is able to draw the smaller parties often considered on the border of Euroscepticism into a European constitutional settlement (and, again, the same can be said for the EPP and ALDE with at least some components of the ECR). The latter can move from mere bystanders to an effective political role in creating an alternative agenda to the austerity mainstream. Overall, this kind of coalition could focus on functional competition ("*about pursuing a political goal that reflects a solution to a social*

⁸⁷ An excellent resource for the voting behaviour of political groups and individual members in the EP can be found under <<http://www.votewatch.eu>>.

⁸⁸ M. Laver and N. Schofield, *Multiparty government: The politics of coalition in Europe*, University of Michigan Press Ann Arbor 1998, p. 12.

⁸⁹ K. von Beyme, *Political Parties in Western Democracies*, Gower Aldershot 1984, p. 224, cit. in M. Laver and N. Schofield, *Multiparty government: The politics of coalition in Europe*, University of Michigan Press Ann Arbor 1998, p. 17.

⁹⁰ P. Mair, *The Green challenge and political competition: How typical is the German experience?* [in:] *German Politics*, N°10(2), 2001, pp. 99-116.

problem”) rather than on a mere institutional logic⁹¹. Instead of simply competing for the sake of their own representation, each EP group and Europarty could cooperate to build political platforms in order to play their role in a dialectic competition between new clusters of actors.

Moving from a “consensual majority vs. hard eurosceptical fringes” framework to left-right opposition as the main cleavage could also serve to contain the further rise of anti-EU movements. That would entail a shift from an “*antagonistic democracy*” paradigm to an “*agonistic*” one, according to Chantal Mouffe’s dichotomy. In this latter view, the vanishing of the left-right cleavage in democratic systems is harmful as it hinders a democratic settlement of political conflict and opens the way to exclusionary identities based on moral, non-negotiable, and often religiously or ethnically charged claims⁹². “*Agonistic pluralism*” can work as a barrier to “*non-democratic identifications*” grounded in ethnicity or religion. In this kind of system the opponent is an adversary rather than an enemy, and the political community is built on grounds not “*of consensus and unanimity, but of contestation and rivalry, where each contestant acknowledges the ‘rules of the game’ and shares a common political culture*”⁹³.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the European political system suffers from an effect of depoliticisation that constrains political contestation over policy alternatives both on the European and national level. The process of European integration, with its emphasis on the creation of a unified economic area, favours the removal of national regulations and makes it difficult to re-introduce market-correcting measures at the European level. Together with the increasingly tight limits for public spending EU governments have agreed to in the fiscal compact, this puts social-democratic parties on the defensive across Europe. Not only is EU-level politics overly tilted towards consensus between the large mainstream party families, but depoliticisation also affects the policy space available for partisan alternatives on the domestic level.

We argue that the way forward lies in a re-politicisation at the EU level, which should be pushed primarily by Europarties within a consolidated Europarty system. We see the emergence of a genuine, democratic and competitive ‘europolitics’ as the most promising option to reverse the depoliticising trend across all levels of the European political system. The left should follow this direction for two reasons: First, it has the potential to democratise the European Union and legitimate the project of integration, and, second, it allows campaigns for policy alternatives to overcome the current gridlock that favours the status quo of austerity and liberalization.

⁹¹ A. Skrzypek, *Unleashing Competitive Spirit. The Role of Europarties in Politicizing Europe*, [in:] *Democratic Legitimacy and Political Leadership in the European Union. Towards the 2014 European Elections*, Fondazione Italianieuropei & FEPS Roma/Brussels 2013, p. 51.

⁹² C. Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*, Verso London 2013.

⁹³ See C. Rumford, *The European Union. A Political Sociology*, Blackwell Oxford 2002, pp. 228-232; C. Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, Verso London 1992, p. 2; C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, Verso London 1993, pp. 4-6.

We have reviewed the ongoing process of formalisation of the role of Europarties and Eurofoundations, and identify two main challenges ahead: First, Europarties must integrate vertically and deepen the links between all organisational levels, from the grassroots to the Brussels-based institutions. Second, the Europarty system has to be widened, in order to draw in political forces from more reluctant national backgrounds and those with more Eurosceptic political leanings. As our discussion of the 2014 EP campaign and its top-candidate procedure has shown, elements of both tasks are already on its way. Ultimately, however, what is needed are closer links between all left and progressive forces in Europe, helping social democrats to break out of the commitment to a ‘grand’ centrist coalition in the EU, and at the same time allowing Greens and the European Left to become real agents for change.

The option for building new types of coalitions based on a stronger transnational constituency and a more integrated party system is a tough challenge. This paper has highlighted two specific tasks for Europarties, but does not exhaust the possible measures. Our reflections align with a great number of proposals coming from politicians, activists and scholars who are dedicated to a democratic and social Europe. This includes “*closer party co-operation at EU level by promoting genuine transnational campaigning and EU level party programmes*”; setting up transnational lists of EP candidates; inverting the subordination of Europarties to party groups due to the public funding system by “*the electoral and party statute/financing reforms*”⁹⁴. All these ideas can contribute to alleviating the current mode of opposition that pits European integration against national sovereignty and identity. This, in turn, is a necessary pre-condition for a possible institutional reform aiming to transform the EU into a multinational state-type polity in the long-term future. In other words, as an institutional reform that enhances political competition is not feasible today, we suggest to invert the direction and start from politics.

Policy Recommendations

A politicisation of European governance was anticipated to lead to more authority transfer by early scholars of European integration⁹⁵. Conceptualised as increased salience, audience expansion and polarisation of opinion, politicisation has been differentiated across the EU and followed a cyclical pattern affected by events such as intergovernmental negotiations, EU accession and referenda. In line with recent advances in the European studies literature this article has argued that politicisation instances have failed to produce integration results so far, especially as regards left wing redistributive and social policies while policy changes that constitute a reversal of policies promoting cohesion and harmonious living standards across the EU have recently been the case. Despite recent electoral reforms, the European system of governance generates a structural trend of depoliticisation which favours a prevailing economic logic that has done little to tackle inequalities, poverty and social exclusion in the EU even at the height of the social, economic, institutional crises faced in many parts of the EU. Therefore this article has called for:

⁹⁴ L. Bardi, *Parties, Party System and Party Government in the European Union*, [in:] *Democratic Legitimacy and Political Leadership in the European Union. Towards the 2014 European Elections*, Fondazione Italianeuropei & FEPS Roma/Brussels 2013, pp. 37-39; European Parliament, *Draft Report on a Proposal for a Modification of the Act Concerning the Election of the Members of the European Parliament by Direct Universal Suffrage of 20 September 1976*, 12 April 2010, 2010/XXXX(INI).

⁹⁵ E. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: political, social and economic forces 1950-1957*, University of Notre Dame Press 2003.

- I. A genuine, democratic and pluralistic Euro-politics based on the strengthening of Europarties, which should develop the institutional clout to disagree on European policies on the left-right axis. This will restrain the rise of hard Eurosceptic voices and the Europeanisation of groups grounded in ethnicity, nationalism and anti-Europeanism. In this way, the prospect of “agonistic pluralism” at EU level can materialise.
- II. A vertical integration and deepening of the links between all organisational units – from local activists to the executive – and territorial levels in the structure of Europarties and Eurofoundations should be pursued. This will include the establishment of coordination structures, the encouragement of grass-roots activism with rights and duties to the common endeavour, the pooling and sharing of resources and the development of multilingual communication platforms. Reinforcing the transnational dimension of campaigning through common lists (as proposed by the EP), inverting the subordination of Europarties to party groups due to the funding rules and strengthening the common programmatic basis and the grassroots are key steps in this direction.
- III. A widening of Europarties to reach out to social and political forces that have so far been outside the mainstream EU political process, also including those from more reluctant national backgrounds and eurosceptic leanings. In parallel, a process of social democratic renewal entails tending a strategic hand to the European Left and Greens to break out of the commitment to a grand coalition with conservative forces and allow pluralist leftwing forces to effect change. This is equally true for the national level, on which social democratic participation in grand coalitions risks to perpetuate the support of the status quo by the European centre-left.
- IV. An institutional reform to entrust responsibility for the EU budget to European institutions and allow genuine democratic control by European citizens through the EP. A parallel increase to the budget safeguarding the seamless implementation of EU policies including policies of promoting social, economic and territorial cohesion and investment in the EU, as well as basic income and employment which will put an end to policy drift towards austerity conditionality and the ineffectual repackaging of existing instruments.

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