

European party jungle

Transnational Parties: a European meander?

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Preface

When you look at the discussion of the last years new terms like globalization, digitalization and individualization were coming up more and more and now even each children in school knows that notions. The democracy and its institutions are threatened with the movement of supranationalization which especially is a big problem for the European Union. Memberstates loose their competence and influence to the bureaucrats in Brussels.

But still parties in London, Berlin, Paris or Warsaw have an important function. They form and elect the government in their countries, candidates of the parties are running for the parliament. Parties aggregate ideas over whole Europe, figure out what people want and try to transfer this ideas into political movement, political action. Parties in western democracies play an important role; without those parties no government can be elected, no government can be controlled, no political decision be taken. So there's still a need for them.

To transform that thoughts to the European level you can ask why don't we need transnational parties, who surmount the complained lack of democracy. Why don't we install transnational parties who aggregate the thoughts, desires and wills of all European citizens to transform them conclusively into united European action? Or are European parties transnational parties?

What is a Transnational Party? – A Definition

To understand the following explanations we have to define what we understand under a transnational party. From the first view this term seems to be a fantasy word, which only says that a party is transnational. But still this is an important character. What means transnational? It means that parties do not only focus on the domestic politics, but further on focus on the international political market. Parties run on the transnational or supranational level for elections, recruit élites and try to articulate and aggregate the will of the people.

In this sense we can assume that European parties like the SPE or EVD or EFA are transnational parties. In focus we can say European parties are party families, because they are a unity of lets say all social democratic parties over Europe. English social democrats are a member as well as the Spanish or the German social democrats are. Finally this essay assumes that transnational parties are European parties.

What makes a party like a party?

The European Union consists of about 15 memberstates. And each memberstate has its own parliamentary system with differences. In England we only have a two party system, with two dominant parties, who formed the government now more than hundreds of years. And on the other hand we have a multiparty system like in Sweden, France and especially Italy, where more than two parties fight for the favor of the voters. Researchers have found five main functions political parties fulfil in parliamentary:

- The identifications of goals: Parties do have an ideology and programs. They try to develop strategies and alternatives.
- The mobilization and socialization of the general public within the system, particularly at elections.
- The articulation and aggregation of social interest. Parties present (quite similar to interest groups) interests, the articulate interests; but they bundle up (aggregate) these interests in the political willing process.
- And elite recruitment and government function.



The European parliament

In other words these functions are representative for all European parties in all memberstates. So the main question when we are talking about transnational parties is now if transnational parties can fit with this functions? Can they have the sane functions or do we have transnational parties like parties in the US? Lets go into more detail and try to find out if transnational parties function like national parties in considering point by point.

The first point: In western democracies parties always do have programs in which they mostly describe their view of the future. In this programs they are saying which kind of world they would like to have. In other words their ideology is written down in such programs. Parties try to work on guiding strategies and inform the people about try to develop strategies for the future and alternative action possibilities. To write down such a program takes a lot of time, because different party wings want to contribute their views. Especially for the huge parties this process is difficult, because their wings have grown up historically. Considering the social democrats for example, they traditionally have two completely different wings. The most crucial point discussing the program and the strategy for the next campaign is the labour market policy. Because the people want to grant from the polity and the new government. People mostly think rational, so they do not to pay attention that much to programs, they want to know which advantages they can expect from that party if it wins the election. And traditionally the different social democratic wings have different views about the right labour market policy.

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Parties try to work on guiding strategies and inform the people about try to develop strategies for the future and alternative action possibilities. To write down such a program takes a lot of time, because different party wings want to contribute their views. Especially for the huge parties this process is difficult, because their wings have grown up historically. Considering the social democrats for example, they traditionally have two completely different wings. The most crucial point discussing the program and the strategy for the next campaign is the labour market policy. Because the people want to grant from the polity and the new government. People mostly think rational, so they do not to pay attention that much to programs, they want to know which advantages they can expect from that party if it wins the election. And traditionally the different social democratic wings have different views about the right labour market policy.

But on the other side a program binds party members together. So to say writing a program is a long and difficult process which has to run trough party institutions and groups. Positions, sharpen opinions, opposite meanings and views from all sides come together. And the duty of each party leader now is to bind those different ways together. At the end a big compromise is the result. Each party wings contributed to that process and are satisfied with their position. And of course this result is, so to say, the common ideology of that party. This result of this discussion process or ideology has a main purpose: it borders the party members with their special view from other parties; so to say the ideology shows the difference of the parties.

So you can conclude that the process of writing a program is to border the party from the enemy other ones, to draw out the main ditches. This again binds the members together and sharpens their view for the enemies. The behavior within parties is more determined by the prevailing counter party. The ideal case is a solidly stand behind the program and the goal of the party which is the main prerequisite to run into a electoral campaign.

And here we come to the second point, the mobilization and socialization of the general public. Who else as the parties mobilize the public when it comes to elections. Therefore parties use their programs and try to combine a program with a candidate. This is of course a part of the strategy.

Parties and their candidates want to recruit people for political activity and political participation. During a federal election other candidates are running on a minor level for political responsibility, local responsibility at the same time. Therefore parties definitely need recruitment. But this people who are running to become the major of a city or village are not just appearing. They have to be formed on different party levels, so to say they have to learn the political business. And candidates have to be associated with the program the party they belong to. So one purpose is to build up long-term settings and examples to show the future of the society and the welfare of the country or the municipality and get this future plans

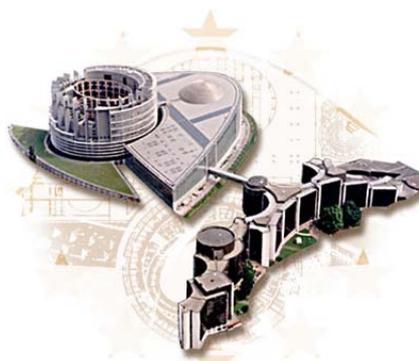
associated with persons. Regional strongholds are playing an important part in the mobilization, because here voters do pay more attention to their surroundings. It is quite obvious that one candidate by himself can not organize a whole campaign, so he needs help, help and support from outside. Often candidates can win old fellows for that job. And he needs the feeling that people do believe in him.

This point is related to my third definition point. Parties articulate and aggregate social interests. Now you critically can ask what is the difference between parties and interest group, because interest groups as well as parties articulate interests of a special part of the society. Modern society systems are segmented and fragmented, many singular interest are competing against each other. And only opinions which have a strong reputation have a chance to win public access. In earlier societies some of these functions were performed by the different classes or estates, or the bureaucracy.

But parties do not only have to represent one single aspect, not one single opinion like for example non governmental organization like WWF or Greenpeace. This is at least the duty of the major parties who want to be called "public parties". They want to represent and stand for social democracy as well for neo-liberal labour market policy. Their political establishment wants to be the agent of the higher class as well as for the working class. Parties can only stress general interests in its propaganda or even develop a tendency to see itself as the "natural party of government".

We have spoken already about that. What parties specially do is to recruit political personal, so called political élites. They are standing at the top of each party organization. This are members of the parliament, ministers, permanent secretaries, party leaders and so on.

With this persons the party will be associated in the public. On the other side they fulfil a main function. Politicians in the parliament on the local or federal level, it does not matter,



Strasbourg

form he government. Concluded to head you can say the political personal has government function, in electing and controlling the government. It could also mean to vote a member of the government out of his/her office. The correct term for this procedure is the vote of no confidence.

Parties affect as a transmission belt, they cause connections between the personnel and institutional separated organs of the executive and legislative and the people.

Conclusions

Now the final question is do parties on the European level matter? The best way to answer that question is to look at the given explanations upper that article. Here we defined parties about their function in the political system. To stay in the line of the definition I would say each point has to be answered with "yes" to say this is a transnational party. I do not want to deny the fact that the definition of parties I have given is a result of a normative concept of democracy. This concept, this idea entails that parties should be representatively democratic and not bureaucratic. They should be oriented to lead the government, at least to from it or to get into opposition. But how is it now? Do transnational European parties have this characteristics given by Weber, Beyme and some others? And is it allowed to speak about transnational parties?

European Parties do have a common ideology and a common program which all the members are standing for. This program borders them from other European party families. This sharpens the view for the own members. European parties do have a program in which they extend their views of the future of the society.

Second European transnational parties do mobilize and socialize the general public. They do touch the interest of the European citizens. One good example for that is that most of the national laws are directives or regulations given by the European Union. So to say Brussels – governs more and more the memberstates. Some regulations and directives come from the initiative of the European parliament. And the parliament is nothing more than elected representatives of the people. And for each election to the European parliament representatives and parties organize a campaign, so they mobilize voters and try to convince them with different strategies.

In theory members of the parliament and their parties they belong to aggregate and articulate the interest of the people, also on the European level. The social democratic party for instance tries to aggregate the ideas, meanings, opinions about politics and polity of their party family subsidiaries. Abstractly you can say parties are the mouthpiece of the people. Here as well I would answer the question with yes.

Now we come to the crucial fourth point. Do European parties recruit political élites? And even more are they responsible for the government formation? My answer will be half and half. European parties definitely recruit political élites. Each European party has a leader, and each parliamentary group of the European parliament has a leader. On the other hand European parties do not train and recruit political personal for being in the government as a secretary or minister. So to say political parties in the EU-parliament do not form and elect the European government, because this does not exist. European parties do not form the government, they do not send their political personal in high political offices. You can say even the opposite. Parties on the European level are concealed as interest associations, because they miss this one important function to form, govern and control the government which is elected by the parliament. As we know the

"government" of the EU is the Commission and the Council. And they will not be elected by the parliament but by the national governments. Each European commissioner was sent into his office by the head of the government of the memberstate he/she belongs to. The same with the president of the Commission. He was as well elected by the heads of the governments of the European memberstates. The last years the parliament fought for more participation in the European political process and they won some rights concerning control of the Commission. Now each Commissioner has to be acknowledged by the parliament, they only have less influence on the fate of the Commission. Because of the fact that members of the EU-parliament are never forced to get responsibility in a government or where ever, the EU-parliament is a calm and silent institution, maybe a bureaucratic institution. And maybe this bureaucratic institution at the same time is the last station for careerists. The EU-parliament does not have any promotion prospects, it is very tough to get a step higher.

So European parties miss this main function. And for that one they only are interest associations, interest associations of the people, but also of companies, other interest groups, scientific staff, bureaucracies and so on. But they are not parties in the original sense. European Parties are parties of clients, but not parties of a huge amount of members.

Or you can say according to the American party system that European parties only are congressional parties. You can characterize this parties with the attributes "constituent". A constituent party priority effects the structure, composition and the function way of the political system. However a responsive party, the second type Lowi describes, is being responsible for their voters through a programmatic which leads its political acting. A responsive party develops coherent models for solving a problem with the obligation to make them to law in the case this party will win the election and form the government.

Now just two final comments. The main difference because European parties can not be parties in the conventional sense is that national parties like Labor in England or Democrazia Christiana in Italy are so called parties for the people. They still have a strong membership and still a lot of people are member of that parties. This is a strong basis for the parties, because this members are mostly loyal voters, so to say staunch supporter by election. Party leaders almost can count on that basis when it comes to federal elections. Where do these staunch supporter come from. In theory these supporter have grown up from a special milieu, lets say the working milieu in big industrial areas. These workers have been socialized with the problems of the working class, they were members of the same sports clubs and so on. So they almost had the same social and political education and experience which distinguishes them from other milieus. And especially this basis is missing for the European parties, because they do not have this staunch supporter. And so they do not have a special milieu where they recruit there political personal from.