



European political parties and the European Council

A pattern of
ever closer
coordination?

STUDY

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European political parties and the European Council: A pattern of ever closer coordination?

The role of the European political parties, often under-estimated in the past, has increased significantly over the years. Today, they are important coordinators within the EU political system, carrying out a variety of activities that can be classified conceptually as 'vertical', 'horizontal' and 'diagonal' coordination.

This EPRS study explores the growing 'politicisation' of the European Council and the increased coordination role which European political parties appear to play in the context of the European Council.

The parties' main coordination activities are clearly their respective 'pre-summits', held just ahead of European Council meetings. These pre-summits serve multiple purposes for the parties – including coordinating positions for the imminent European Council discussions, long-term strategising, communication, socialising and networking – with the importance of each varying between the different parties.

A case study looking at the nomination of the EU's new institutional leadership in 2019 illustrates the importance of the European political parties' role in coordinating between EU leaders in the European Council.

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Executive summary

European political parties matter. They matter for the functioning of the European Union in general, in the context of the European Council, and when choosing the EU's institutional leadership. In the EU's multi-level political system, power is shared between different actors and levels. To keep the EU functioning, a high degree of coordination is needed, to which European political parties make an important contribution.

The role of European political parties, often under-estimated in the past, has increased significantly. Milestones in this development have been the reference to political parties in the Maastricht Treaty and the provision of legal status to them, their direct access to EU funding, and the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, giving them a significant role in the European Parliament elections.

With the increasing institutionalisation of European political parties, and the increased role of the European Council, the coordination activities of the three main European political parties – the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) – in relation to the European Council have also increased. These activities can be classified conceptually as 'vertical', 'horizontal' and 'diagonal' coordination: the first represents the bridge between national and European level; the second helps to overcome silos between the EU institutions; and the third concerns interactions across Member States. Such activities indicate that European political parties are both 'arenas' and 'actors' when it comes to coordinating positions between Member States and promoting a smoother functioning of the EU.

The main way that European political parties coordinate among the members of the European Council affiliated to their political families is by organising 'pre-summit' meetings, bringing together their parties' leaderships immediately ahead of a European Council meeting. The pre-summits can serve multiple purposes for European political parties, including coordinating positions for the imminent European Council discussions, long-term strategising, communication, socialising and networking. The importance of each of these functions varies between the different parties, and between the status of different participants at a pre-summit (for example, whether a person is an EU Head of State or Government or a national opposition leader).

The organisation of, and participation in, pre-summit meetings has developed over time and continues to evolve. The number of pre-summit meetings has increased over the past decade, not only due to the increased number of European Council meetings, but also because EU Heads of State or Government appear to see the usefulness of these coordination activities and request more of them.

As further evidence of the European political families' communication activities regarding the European Council, this study also provides an analysis of the Twitter activity of European political parties and groups in the European Parliament. The findings show that all political families use Twitter in the context of the European Council, but that their activities vary between, and within, political parties and political groups as to the scope, number and regularity of their tweets.

The conclusions of the study support the argument that the EU is becoming increasingly 'politicised', and that this applies particularly to the European Council. This growing politicisation, and the increased coordination role of the European political parties in the context of the European Council, need to be seen as two complementary processes reinforcing one another. The politicisation of the European Council has led to further attention being paid to this body by the European political parties, which in turn has further increased the politicisation of the European Council. Moreover, the fact that European political parties are strengthening their

coordination activities, based on growing demand by their affiliates who are members of the European Council, would support this claim.

The politicisation of the European Council has been particularly evident in the nominations of the EU's institutional leadership over the last decade and a half. As the party political balance in the European Council and the European Parliament has shifted in comparison to previous institutional cycles, so has the mix of party political backgrounds of the EU's new institutional leaders, nominated at the outset of each cycle.

To fully appreciate the coordinating role of European political parties with regard to the European Council, it is necessary to look beyond the party political affiliation of the Heads of State or Government alone, and consider the number of coalition governments in Member States and in which the national affiliates of European political parties are involved.

A case study looking at the nomination of the EU's new institutional leadership in 2019 illustrates the important coordination role of European political parties between the EU Heads of State or Government in the European Council. The novel approach of using negotiators for the main European political parties, with internal European political party decisions overturning preliminary deals between groups of EU Heads of State or Government – as well as the interruptions of a decisive European Council meeting to allow European party political formations to meet – show the extent to which affiliation to European political families played a structuring role in the nomination process in 2019.

The study suggests that European political parties, which have long been under-estimated, play a very significant role in the functioning of the European Union, and argues that they ought to be recognised for what they really provide for the European system, namely oiling the wheels of the EU institutional machinery, in particular through facilitating coordination across institutional barriers.

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Introduction

Political parties are an essential part of our democratic systems and help to shape political life. They link national politics with European politics and bring European citizens closer to the EU institutions. While a strong, competitive party system is generally considered necessary for any democracy,¹ the role of European political parties in the current functioning of the European Union has often been overlooked or under-estimated.

From the early days in the history of the EU, different party political families started gradually to organise themselves at European level. In the wake of successive EU treaty changes, which strengthened the European Parliament (EP), the role of political groups in the Parliament became more significant. The Parliament's growing role triggered a dual process: it fostered the transformation of transnational associations of national political parties into proper parties at European level² and led to growing politicisation of the EU.

One definition of 'politicisation' sees it as 'the process through which European integration has become the subject of public discussion, debate, and contestation'.³ Political parties are shaping this process, while at the same time being impacted by it. Politicisation has also been understood – and this is complementary – as 'the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics – making previously unpolitical matters political'.⁴

Academics have paid increasing attention to political families at European level. Initially, research focused mainly on the European political groups in the European Parliament, but later research papers also looked at how the European political parties organise themselves outside the Parliament and in relation to other EU institutions.⁵ Some of the later research has also examined how the growing party politicisation extends to the European Council,⁶ and has identified the growing influence of national politics on Member State positions in the European Council.⁷

The European Council is, along with the European Parliament, the EU institution that has probably gained most in influence through the treaty changes of recent decades and de facto developments, including its growing role as crisis manager, which is not set out in the Treaties.⁸ Its activities have increased over time and have become more institutionalised.⁹

But how have European political parties adapted to the increased role of the European Council? To answer this question, this paper examines how the three main European political parties, which are also those with most representation in the European Council – the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) – have integrated the growing role and activities of the European Council into their own activities.

There are many actors and interests that influence European Council members (for instance, national interests, coalition partners, European geographical alliances) in their decision-making process. This makes it difficult to measure the specific influence of European political parties' activities on European Council decisions, which is also not the intention of this paper. Rather, it aims to demonstrate how European political parties coordinate the members of the European Council belonging to their political family, and provide examples of how the European Council has become more politicised.

The main hypothesis is that European political parties have strengthened their focus on the European Council, and that the members of the European Council have realised the added value of coordinating with the other EU Heads of State or Government from their respective European political party. The research contributes to knowledge about the European Council and the European political parties, adding new empirical evidence on these parties' activities, particularly their 'pre-summits', which political families hold just ahead of the meetings of the European Council.

Chapter 1 looks briefly at what European parties are and how their role and legal basis has developed historically, while also outlining the political parties that exist at European level. As the development of European parties is closely linked to the political groups in the European Parliament, this chapter also looks at the relationship between European political parties and the political groups in the Parliament, providing state-of-the-art data on the cohesiveness between political parties and their corresponding political groups in the Parliament. It will also conceptualise the coordination role of European political parties by introducing the concepts of 'horizontal', 'vertical', and 'diagonal' coordination.

Chapter 2 begins by outlining the members of the European Council by political family and examining how this membership has developed over time. In this section, the paper will also provide another dimension to the link between political parties and the European Council through a unique overview of the party political make-up of the different (coalition) governments in the Member States and their respective affiliations to European political parties and/or political groups in the European Parliament.

Chapter 3 examines the coordination activities of the three main European political parties, the EPP, PES and ALDE, around European Council meetings. The focus will be on the pre-summits, assessing the functions of these pre-summits, the number and types of participants, the frequency of meetings and the parties' communication about them. As social media, and notably Twitter, have become an important part of political communication, this study will build on the methodology developed in previous EPRS work on the [Twitter activity of the members of the European Council](#). It will assemble and analyse a unique dataset on the Twitter activities of the three main European political parties and political groups in the Parliament in the context of the European Council.

As European political parties are assumed to be most influential in the European Council on institutional issues, **Chapter 4** examines, through a case study, the nomination of the EU's new institutional leadership in 2019. First, the chapter briefly reviews the academic debate on the influence of European political parties on European Council decisions. Then, it outlines the political make-up of the European Council when the new institutional leaders were nominated in 2009 and 2014, as well as the political affiliation of the office-holders nominated. Lastly, it examines the various steps taken by the European Council in selecting the EU's new institutional leadership in 2019, and assesses to what extent politicisation affected a particular institutional decision by the European Council and how the coordination role of European political parties functioned in this context.

1. European political parties

European political parties – which, in academic literature, are also referred to as transnational party federations,¹⁰ Europarties,¹¹ or transnational political party networks¹² – can be [described](#) as ‘federations of national political parties from several Member States which are united by political affinity’. [Regulation \(EU, Euratom\) No 1141/2014](#), which governs European political parties at EU level (see below), defines them as an ‘association of citizens, which pursues political objectives, and is either recognised by, or established in accordance with, the laws of at least one EU Member State’.

The official role of European political parties, as outlined in the Treaties, is to ‘contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union’ (Article 10(4) of the Treaty on European Union). [Regulation \(EU, Euratom\) No 1141/2014](#) fleshes this out in more detail, stating that they ‘have a key role to play in articulating the voices of citizens at European level by bridging the gap between politics at national level and at Union level’ (Recital 4). This vertical form of coordination, linking the European and national levels, is only one of the ways in which European political parties coordinate on EU-related political activities (see Section 1.4 below).

While the existence and growing role of European political parties has, in the past, been ‘one of the best kept secrets in Brussels’,¹³ today there is extensive literature on European political parties, including in-depth analyses of individual political parties and comprehensive overviews of the development of European political parties.¹⁴

Some academics debate whether European political parties are real parties compared to political parties in nation states.¹⁵ However, assessing European political parties based on the characteristics of national parties is misleading. The European Union is a special form of political system, being a multi-level governance system where responsibilities and competences are divided both vertically and horizontally between institutions. Some identify the EU as a federal union in the making, which has developed out of sovereign Member States (and not through a decentralisation process) and in which the Member States and national political parties play a central role.¹⁶

Consequently, European political parties should be considered within this special EU framework and assessed in connection with their capacity to coordinate between the different institutions and between the different levels in the multi-level system – and not based on the definition of national political parties in nation states.

Before formally gaining this coordination role, legal provisions on European political parties went through a number of developments, including treaty reforms and changes in secondary legislation. These aspects will now be examined in more detail.

1.1. Historical development and legal basis for European political parties

The role and activities of European political parties have increased significantly over time. Informal gatherings of like-minded national political parties across Europe have taken place since the 1950s, and the first transnational alliances of political parties at European level were founded before the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979.

The Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community, later to become the Party of European Socialists (PES), was founded in 1973.¹⁷ The European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) – later called the Federation of Liberal and Democrat Parties in Europe, before becoming the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Party – and the European People’s Party (EPP) were established in 1976.¹⁸ In 1981, the European Free Alliance (EFA) joined them at European level.

Compared to its competitors, the EPP was the most advanced in its structural and organisational development, because the party was, from the beginning, more independent than the other European political parties from their corresponding political group in the European Parliament; for example, the EPP had its own secretariat outside the Parliament.¹⁹

Over the years, there have been numerous political and legal developments regarding European political parties, the three most significant developments being:

- In 1992, when the Maastricht Treaty gave European political parties legal standing in the EU Treaties for the first time. This changed the nature of the European political parties, which had remained rather informal until then.
- In 2004, when European political parties were granted direct access to annual funding from the European Parliament.²⁰ Numerous additional European political parties were created around this time.
- In 2013/2014, the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system provided European political parties with a role in campaigning for the European Parliamentary elections in 2014, and later in 2019.

1.1.1. Development of Treaty articles on European political parties

Although they had been active at European level for a number of decades, the Maastricht Treaty was the first EU treaty to acknowledge European political parties. While the Amsterdam Treaty did not add any further provisions, the Nice Treaty introduced several precisions regarding the status of European political parties. It provided for the adoption of a regulation governing European political parties under the co-decision procedure, thus paving the way for the adoption of the first EU regulation governing political parties, [Regulation \(EC\) No 2004/2003](#) (paragraph 2 of Article 191).

Even then, the Nice Treaty stressed that future regulations governing political parties should include rules on the funding of European political parties. It included a declaration which specified that the funding for political parties at European level would come from the budget of the European Communities, and should not be used to fund political parties at national level.

The changes introduced with the Lisbon Treaty were rather procedural, notably splitting former Article 191 into two articles: Article 10(4) TEU and Article 224 TFEU. While the former outlines the importance of European political parties to 'forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union', the latter stipulates that the European Parliament and the Council shall, following the ordinary legislative procedure, lay down the regulations governing political parties at European level and, in particular, the rules on their funding.

Table 1 – Development of Treaty articles on European political parties

Treaty	Year signed	Article	Text
Maastricht	1992	138a	<i>Political parties at European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union.</i>
Amsterdam	1997	191	No content changes, only the numbering of the article.
Nice	2001	191 Declaration on Article 191	<i>Political parties at European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union.</i> <i>The Council, acting in accordance with the procedure referred to in Article 251, shall lay down the regulations governing political parties at European level and in particular the rules regarding their funding.</i> <i>The funding for political parties at European level provided out of the budget of the European Communities may not be used to fund, either directly or indirectly, political parties at national level. The provisions on the funding for political parties shall apply, on the same basis, to all the political forces represented in the European Parliament.</i>
Lisbon	2007	Article 10(4) TEU Article 224 TFEU	<i>Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.</i> <i>The European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure, by means of regulations, shall lay down the regulations governing political parties at European level referred to in Article 10(4) of the Treaty on European Union and in particular the rules regarding their funding.</i>

Source: EPRS.

While the Treaties provided a legal basis, described their role, and outlined the legislative procedure applicable for adopting the legal act governing European political parties, it was then up to the co-legislators to flesh out the specific rules for establishing, governing and financing European political parties.

1.1.2. Secondary EU law

As specified in Article 191 of the Nice Treaty, on 4 November 2003 the Parliament and the Council adopted [Regulation \(EC\) No 2004/2003](#) on the rules governing political parties at European level and their funding, which came into force in July 2004. Since then, European political parties have received annual funding from the European Parliament's part of the EU budget. The Regulation was amended in 2007 and replaced in 2014 by [Regulation \(EU, Euratom\) 1141/2014](#), later amended in 2018. Recently, on 25 November 2021, the Commission put forward a [proposal](#) to recast Regulation (EU, Euratom) 1141/2014. Some of the main adaptations included:

- a clearer separation between political parties and political groups in the European Parliament;
- since 2014, European political parties may acquire European legal personality;

- the possibility to create European political foundations;
- the ability to use the funds for campaigning ahead of European Parliamentary elections;
- measures to increase transparency of decision-making and funding.

Table 2 – Evolution of EU legislation on European political parties

Legislation	Adopted	Coming into force	Main development
Regulation (EC) 2004/2003	November 2003	July 2004	Access to annual funding from the European Parliament. Clearer separation between political parties and political groups in the EP.
Regulation (EC) 1524/2007	December 2007	December 2007	Ability to use their funds for campaigning in EP elections. Foundations included in the Regulation.
Regulation (EU, Euratom) 1141/2014	October 2014	January 2017	Increased transparency in party funding and decision-making structures. Creation of the Authority on European Political Parties and Political Foundations.
Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/673	April 2018	May 2018	Only political parties – and no longer individuals – are to be taken into account for the purpose of minimum representation requirements. ²¹ Modifications to the criteria for distributing EU funds.
2021 proposal (COM(2021)734)	TBC	TBC	They can have members located in countries outside the EU but belonging to the Council of Europe. Increases transparency requirements as regards political advertising and donations. They may receive financial income from their own economic activities. They can use EU funds in national referendum campaigns on issues related to the implementation of the EU treaties.

Source: EPRS.

The review of [Regulation \(EC\) 2004/2003](#) in December 2007 included the possibility to create and fund European political foundations. Currently, a European political foundation is defined as an entity which is formally affiliated with a European political party and underpins and complements the objectives of that party. It should perform one or more of the following tasks:

- observing, analysing and contributing to the debate on European public policy issues and on the process of European integration;
- developing activities linked to European public policy issues, such as organising and supporting seminars, training, conferences and studies on such issues between relevant stakeholders, including youth organisations and other representatives of civil society;
- developing cooperation in order to promote democracy, including in third countries;
- serving as a framework for national political foundations, academics and other relevant actors to work together at European level.²²

In November 2021, the European Commission proposed to recast the Regulation on European political parties and foundations to address loopholes and make additional improvements.²³

1.1.3. Authority and register

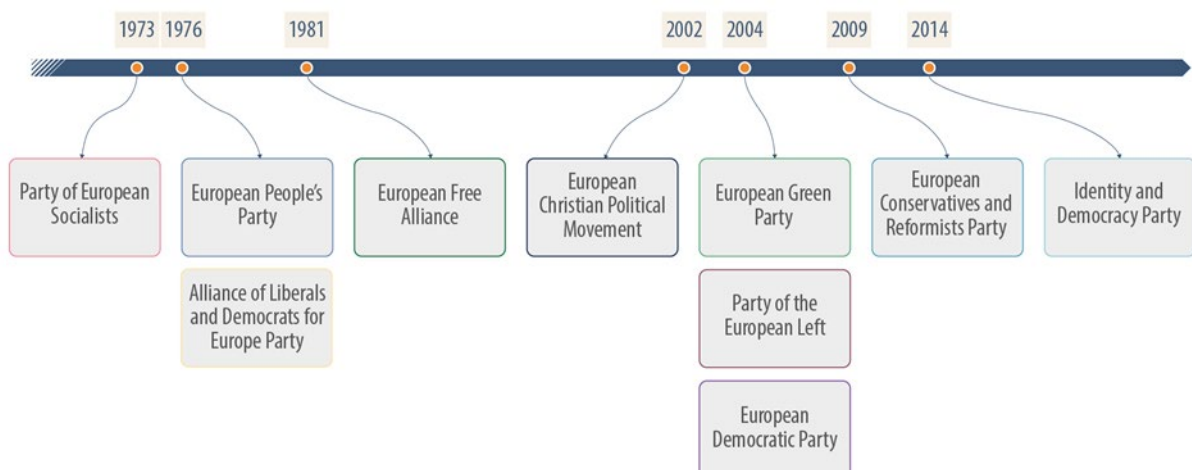
One of the main changes brought about by [Regulation \(EU, Euratom\) 1141/2014](#) was the creation of an independent Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (the Authority). The role of the [Authority](#) is to register and de-register, control and, if necessary, impose sanctions on European political parties and foundations. The Authority regularly verifies that, upon being registered, European political parties and foundations continue to comply with the requirements set out in Regulation (EU, Euratom) 1141/2014, including if they fail to respect fundamental European values. The Authority also manages the register of [European political parties](#) and [European political foundations](#).

1.1.4. European political parties at the beginning of 2022

At the beginning of 2022, there were 10 European political parties [registered](#) with the Authority:

- Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE)
- [European People's Party](#) (EPP)
- [Party of European Socialists](#) (PES)
- [European Democratic Party](#) (EDP)
- [European Free Alliance](#) (EFA)
- [European Green Party](#)
- [Party of the European Left](#)
- European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR)
- [European Christian Political Movement](#) (ECPM)
- [Identity and Democracy Party](#) (ID)

Figure 1 – Year of foundation of European political parties



Source: EPRS.

Due to the close relationship between European political parties and the political groups in the European Parliament, including in some cases the sharing of certain tasks regarding coordination towards the European Council (see below), it is worthwhile examining the relationship between individual political groups in the Parliament and European political parties in more detail.

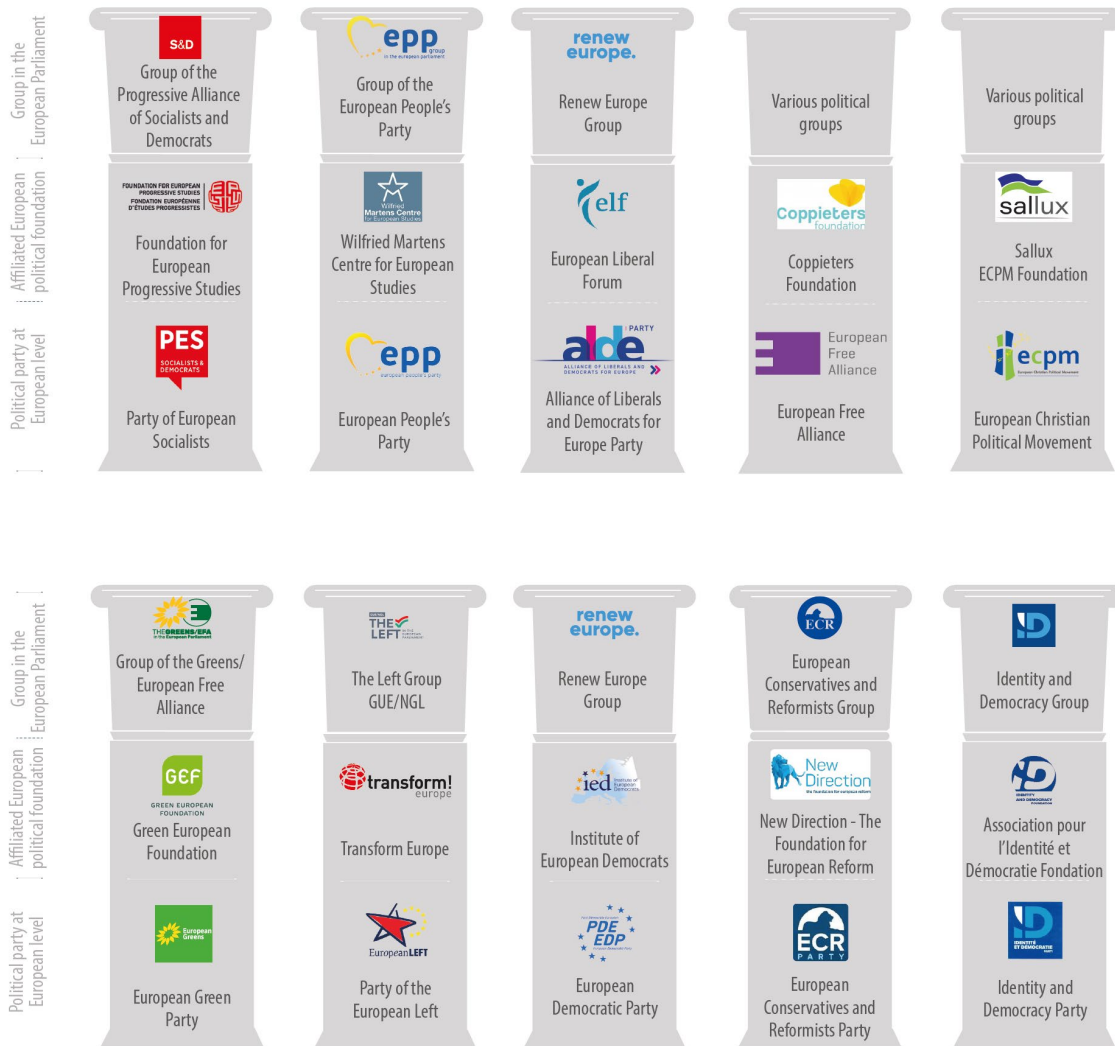
1.2. Overlap between EP political groups and European political parties

European political parties are closely linked, but not all to the same degree, to political groups in the European Parliament and have developed in close coordination with them at European level. In many cases, European political parties have developed out of the political groups in the Parliament.²⁴

While being closely linked politically, these two types of organisation are now legally and financially separate. Prior to 2004, since when they could get direct EU funding, European political parties were very much dependent on the financial and logistical support of the affiliated political group in the EP; their legal and financial independence from their respective groups in the EP has developed and strengthened over time.²⁵

While European political parties do not always have a one-to-one match with political groups, each political party has a corresponding political foundation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Overview of the European political parties, their related political groups in the EP, and European political foundations



Notes: Political structures are presented in chronological order of the year of foundation of the relevant European political party, as indicated under each column.

Source: EPRS, based on information from the [Authority](#).

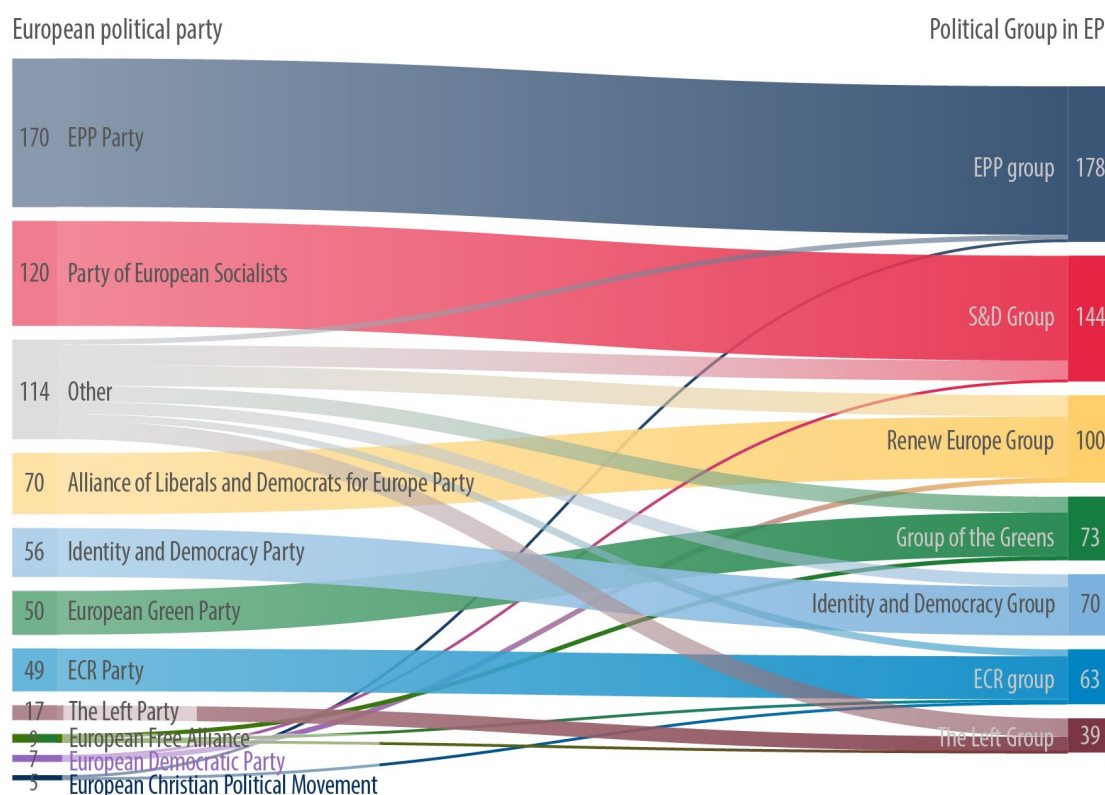
Notable differences between political parties and political groups include i) their focus, and ii) their membership.

While political groups in the European Parliament are clearly focused on activities relating to legislative, budgetary and scrutiny work in Parliament, the scope of political parties is wider, including their activities in different EU institutions.

Parties and political groups can also differ based on their membership. National parties can be members of a European political party without being affiliated to the corresponding political group; for example, because they do not have any Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). At the same time, not all MEPs in a political group come from national parties that are members of the corresponding European political party. Some of these MEPs then affiliate themselves individually to a European political party. One important point showing the closeness and coherence between European political parties and political groups is the overlap among their MEPs. Academics have measured this by examining the number of MEPs in a political group that come from national parties affiliated to the respective European political party.²⁶

Figure 3 shows that the highest proportion of MEPs in European Parliament political groups, by far, comes from the corresponding European political party. However, most political groups draw some of their MEPs from national parties; these national parties are not necessarily associated with the same political party at EU level, and their MEPs are sometimes affiliated to different European political groups.

Figure 3 – Overlap of MEPs between political parties and political groups in the ninth parliamentary term (2019-2024)

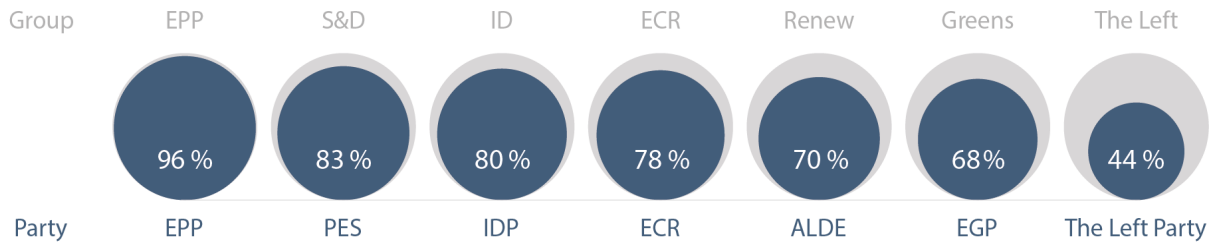


Source: EPRS.²⁷

The analysis identifies the following findings about the relationship between political groups in the European Parliament and European political parties:

- the EPP group has MEPs from national parties associated with the EPP party and from the European Christian Political Movement;
- the S&D group has MEPs whose national parties belong to the PES or the European Democratic Party (EDP);
- Renew Europe has an overlap both with ALDE and the EDP;
- the ECR group includes MEPs from three European political parties – the ECR party, the European Free Alliance and the European Christian Political Movement;
- the Group of the Greens includes MEPs whose national parties are affiliated with the European Green Party and MEPs whose national parties are affiliated with the European Free Alliance;
- the Left group contains MEPs linked to the Left party and MEPs linked to the European Free Alliance;
- the Identity and Democracy (ID) group is the only one whose Members come from only one European political party.

Figure 4 – Percentage of MEPs in a political group associated with the respective political party through their national party²⁸

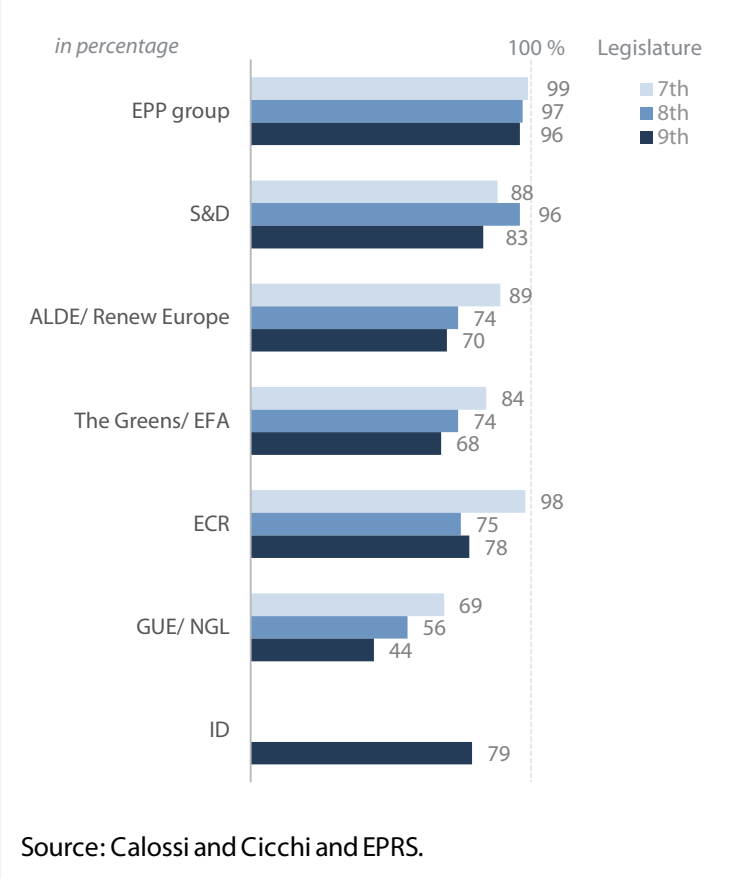


Source: EPRS.

Figure 4 illustrates the overlap between political parties at European level and political groups during the ninth term of the European Parliament. It shows that the EPP group has the highest overlap with their main corresponding political party at European level, with 96%.²⁹ The S&D group, the ID group and the ECR group all have around 80% of their MEPs coming from the national parties, which are respectively members of the PES, ID party and ECR party.

Around 70% of Renew Europe and Green MEPs are affiliated to ALDE and the European Green party, respectively, through their national political party. The lowest overlap between a political group and the corresponding European party, based on the affiliation of MEPs to national member associations, is between the European Left party and the Left group, which only amounts to around 44%.

Figure 5 – Development of overlap between political group and main corresponding political party



Source: Calossi and Cicchi and EPRS.

Comparing these findings with similar analysis from previous legislatures shows that all political groups, with the exception of the S&D, reduced their overlap with their corresponding political party at European level from the seventh to the eighth terms. This is linked to the fact that the political groups opened their doors to an increasing number of MEPs who were not affiliated to national political parties that are members of their political party. From the eighth to the ninth terms, all political groups experienced a decrease in overlaps, with the exception of the ECR.

Another important feature illustrating the close interconnection between a European political party and the affiliated political group in the EP is that the highest political bodies in the political parties often include the president of the corresponding political group and other current MEPs. Sometimes, European Commissioners are also part of the governance structure of European political parties; this of course facilitates the horizontal coordination role of European political parties between the different EU institutions (see below).

In general, it has been observed that European Commissioners have become more outspoken about their political background and active in their respective European parties than in the past, which is another example of the increased politicisation of the EU. Former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker actively promoted greater visibility of the political affiliation of Commissioners by encouraging his Commissioners to attend the pre-summit and other meetings of their respective European political parties.³⁰ In some European parties, Commissioners are even vice-presidents.

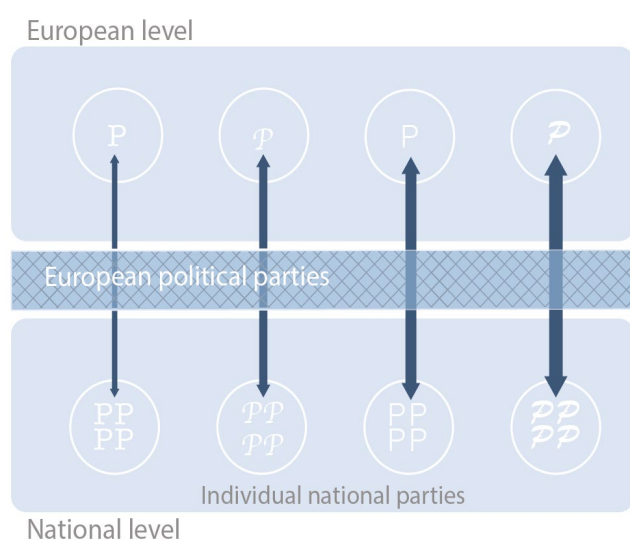
1.3. European political parties' different forms and levels of coordination

Academics and representatives of the main European political parties agree that one of the main functions of European political parties is to act as coordinators.³¹ This coordination role of European political parties can take three different forms: i) vertical, ii) horizontal, and iii) diagonal.

1.3.1. Vertical coordination

Article 10(4) TEU specifies that 'political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union'. This clearly indicates the important vertical coordination role of European political parties in providing the link between the national and the European level. European political parties have been described as the 'bridge between the Brussels Bubble and national politics'.³² They do this, for example, by informing their national members about developments at European level, but also by bringing their members' national issues to the European level.

Figure 6 – Vertical coordination between national parties at national and European level



Source: EPRS.

Academics identify the [Convention on the Future of Europe](#) in 2001-2002 as another example, showing that 'the big political families (and especially the well-organised centre-right European People's Party and centrist Liberals) were crucial in the Convention's final weeks. They established bridges between MEPs and national parliamentarians. The party frameworks fostered links that became quite close.'³³

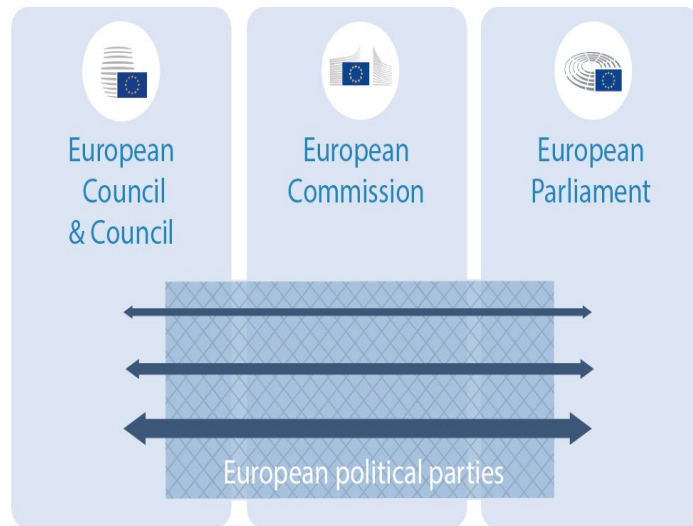
Another example of the vertical coordination role of European political parties is their activities linking the European and national levels when nominating their party *Spitzenkandidaten* in the context of the EP elections.

These personalities are the first to be considered, and in some cases, such as in 2014, one of them is actually elected as European Commission President. Academics have described European political parties as gatekeepers, which (pre-)select the range of options from which voters can choose.³⁴

1.3.2. Horizontal coordination

While vertical coordination takes place between different levels, notably the national and the European levels, horizontal coordination refers to coordination at the same level, the European level, but between different actors, namely the EU institutions.

Figure 7 – Horizontal coordination among national parties in EU institutions



Source: EPRS.

European political parties stress the danger of working in silos and the importance of coordinating the different actors. It is not enough only to coordinate between prime ministers or between European Commissioners from the same political family; it is essential to do so across the EU institutions.³⁵

Consequently, European political parties are important actors in ensuring that policies between the EU institutions are coherent. As they have representatives in all European institutions, they play this coordination role throughout the whole policy cycle. One could even consider European political parties to be a marketplace where representatives of the different EU institutions can meet.³⁶

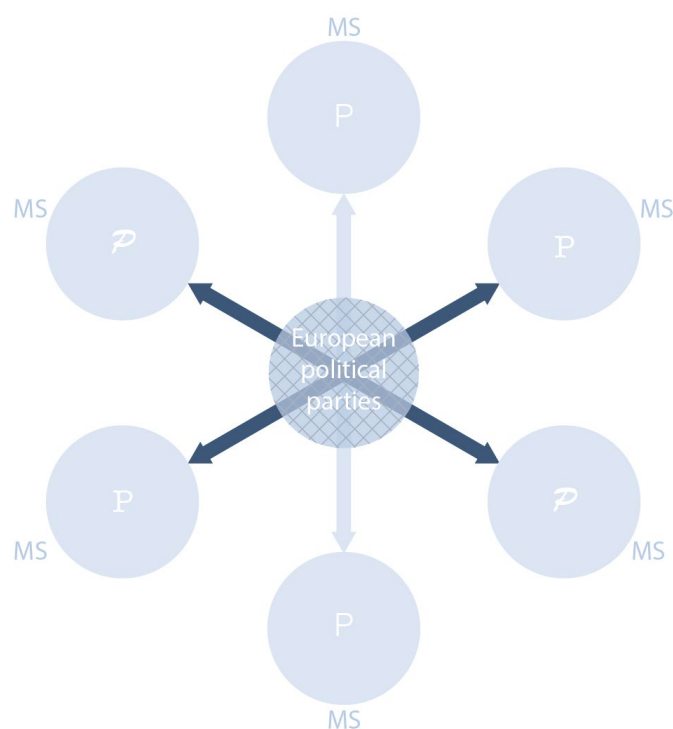
Both academics and practitioners stress the uniqueness of pre-summit meetings of European political parties in bringing representatives of the main EU institutions (the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Council) together on a regular basis in an institutionalised setting, allowing them to contribute to political coordination.³⁷ The pre-summit meetings – as well as the pre-Council thematic working groups of European political parties – provide the ideal fora for this horizontal coordination, acting as a hub for interinstitutional discussions and thus oiling the wheels of the EU's institutional machinery.

1.3.3. Diagonal coordination

The diagonal coordination role of European political parties consists of facilitating communication and EU-related activities between their members from different EU Member States. Of course, there are possibilities for direct bilateral relations between national members of the same European political family; however, through their activities and events, European political parties often stimulate the creation of these bilateral personal relations.

Furthermore, they provide a forum, and function as a facilitator, for these relations and for coordination, especially if a discussion involves national parties from more than two Member States. Moreover, as European political parties sometimes have various affiliates from the same Member State, the European political party can help to coordinate cooperation between different national parties from the same political family.

Figure 8 – Diagonal coordination among national parties in Member States



Source: EPRS.

While party congresses provide an example of this diagonal coordination, the more frequent pre-summit meetings and the pre-Council thematic working groups of European political parties play a substantial role in party coordination. The PES even mentions in its [statutes](#) that its ministerial and pre-Council meetings are aimed at improving 'the coordination of PES Heads of State and Government or Ministers and develop[ing] common positions for European Council meetings'.

All these forms of coordination – vertical, horizontal and diagonal – indicate that European political parties are both 'arenas' and 'actors' when it comes to coordinating positions between Member States and a smoother functioning of the EU.³⁸ On the one hand, they provide various fora in which national political parties and representatives of the European institutions meet and discuss EU affairs; on the other hand, they steer processes and activities which can then influence the policy choices of other actors, including Member States and EU institutions.

2. Party political make-up of the European Council

What are the party political majorities in the European Council? Have they been the same over the past two decades?

To answer these questions, this chapter examines the political affiliation of the members of the European Council and the changing party political balance therein over time. It also provides an overview of the party political make-up of the national governments, outlining to which European political parties and/or political groups in the EP they are affiliated.

2.1. Political affiliation of EU leaders in the European Council

2.1.1. Members of the European Council

The European Council consists of the 27 Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States, who are voting members, together with the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission, who have no vote (Article 15(2) TEU). The great majority of leaders in the European Council (24) are heads of government, while a small number (four) hold the office of head of state.³⁹

In the past, there were some national discussions about who should represent their country in the European Council, the head of state or the head of government.⁴⁰ These debates have, in general, been settled, but come up again sometimes if the head of state and the head of government in a Member State belong to different political parties (e.g. Romania in 2018). In some cases, such as in Bulgaria in 2021, when a country has no government with full powers, but only a caretaker government, the (independent) President attended the meetings of the European Council.

2.1.2. Party affiliation in the European Council

It is important to recall that the members of the European Council are politicians, who not only represent the national interest of their country, but also the views of their national parties, which in many cases they also lead. These national parties are, in most cases, affiliated to European political parties and their MEPs belong to the respective European political groups.

As outlined above, regarding the overlap between European political parties and political groups in the EP, the national party of an MEP is not always also affiliated to the 'corresponding' European political party; this principle applies in general also to EU Heads of State or Government. However, here the difference is rather limited, with only sporadic variations over time. Currently, there are only two exceptions: 1) French President Emmanuel Macron, whose national party is a member of the Renew Europe political group in the EP but is not a member of the corresponding European political party, ALDE; 2) the same is true for Slovakian Prime Minister Eduard Heger, whose national party is not a member of the EPP, but whose MEPs sit in the EPP group in the EP.⁴¹

2.1.3. Changes in the balance

The length of an individual EU Head of State or Government's membership of the European Council is not set down in the EU Treaties, but is directly linked to changes in the composition of national governments or the term of office of a head of state in the EU Member States. These changes impact the balance between the different European political parties represented in the European Council.

Academic research on partisan composition of the European Council identifies three distinct periods between 1985 and 2004: a conservative predominance in the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s; a socialist predominance in the second half of the 1990s; and a conservative and liberal predominance in the first half of the 2000s.⁴²

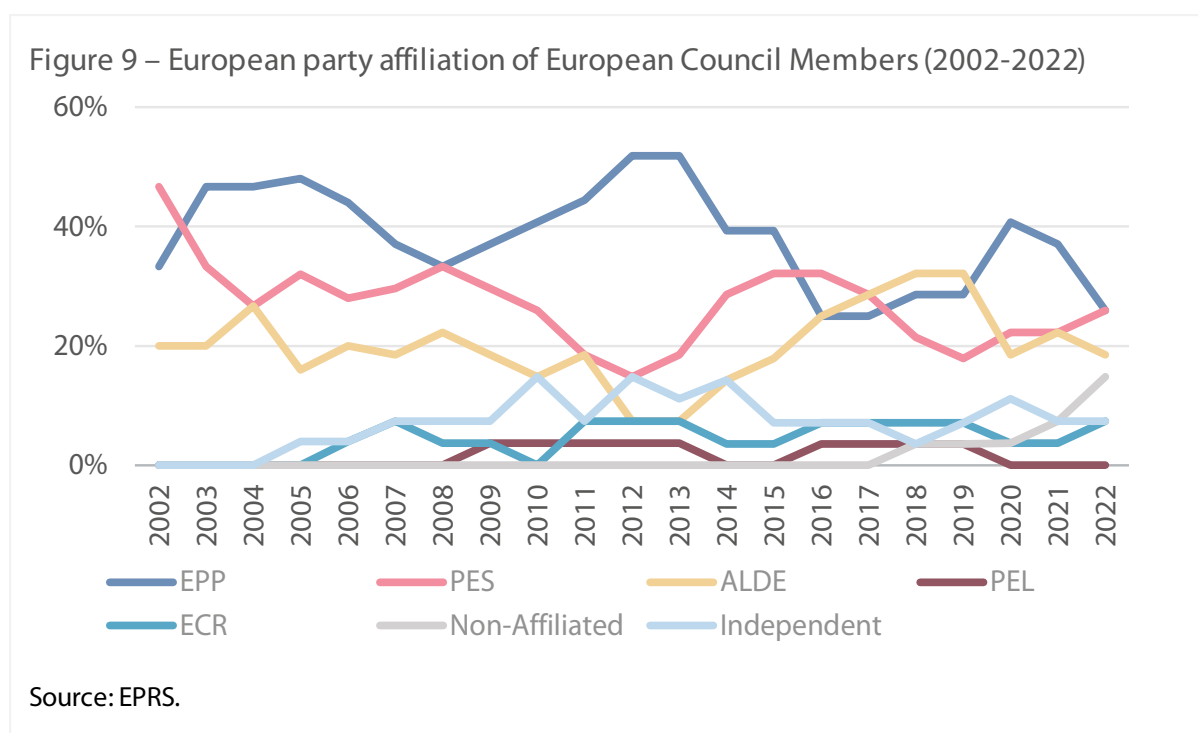
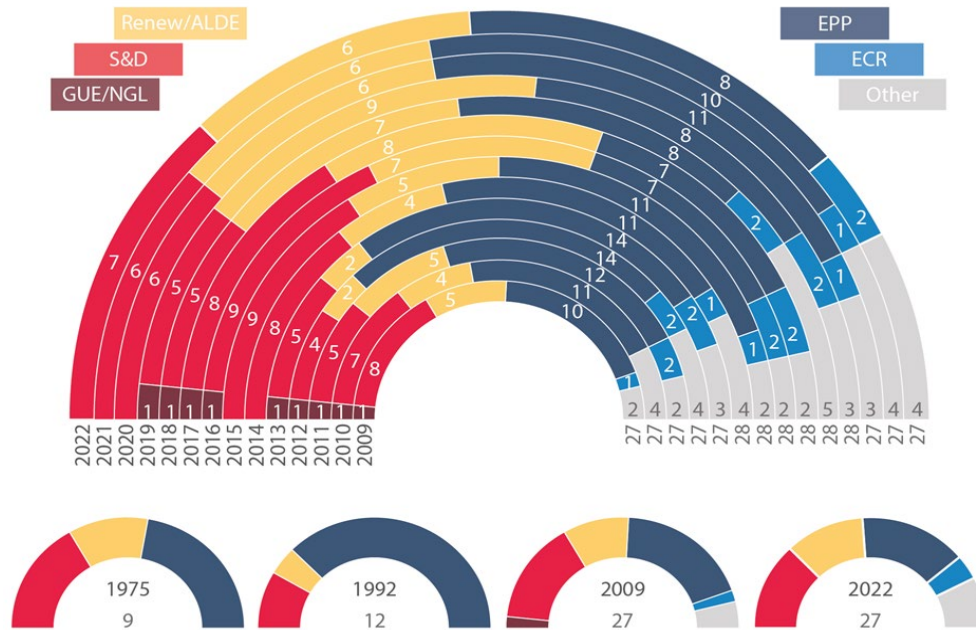


Figure 9 shows that, since 2002, on an annual average the EPP has included 39% of EU Heads of State or Government, 27% belonged to the PES and 20% came from ALDE-affiliated national parties. The high point for the EPP was in 2012-2013, when 52% belonged to this party family. The PES had its highpoint in 2002, with 47%, and the high point for ALDE was in 2018-2019, with 29%. The liberal family was, for decades, in third place in respect of affiliated European Council members, but between 2017 and 2020 it had the second highest number of affiliated Heads of State or Government in the European Council, which also partly explained its growing coordination activities.

While in numerical terms all of the three main political parties have had high and low points since the 2000s, it would neither be possible nor accurate to determine periods where one or the other main party 'dominated' the European Council. The post-2004 period should rather be considered as the end of single-party dominance in the European Council and an era of increased party diversity.

Figure 10 – Affiliation of EU Heads of State or Government to political groups in the EP



NB: The charts above show the situation on 1 January of the year concerned.

Source: EPRS.

Figure 10 shows that the ideological heterogeneity in the European Council has increased and the diversity of political affiliations has broadened over time. For example, while in 2005 96 % of Heads of State or Government in the European Council were active members of one of the three big political families (EPP, PES or ALDE), this percentage has declined continuously, reaching 71 % at the start of 2022.

From the second half of the 2000s, one can observe a constant increase in European Council members from other European parties, who are members of national political parties that are not attached to European political parties or that are categorised as independent. More specifically, the rise of independent and non-attached EU heads of state can be explained by the fact that: i) some EU Member States that joined in 2004 are represented by a party-politically neutral head of state (for example, in the case of Lithuania); ii) the increased frequency of national governments being led by a person without, at least temporarily, any party-political affiliation (e.g. Austria, Italy, France); and iii) national political parties leaving European political parties (e.g. the UK and Hungary, where the Conservatives and Fidesz, respectively, left the EPP).

When looking at the affiliation to political groups in the EP at the beginning of 2022, the European Council included eight members from the EPP, seven from the S&D, six from Renew Europe, two from the ECR, three non-affiliated members and two independent members.

2.2. Party coalitions

In the case of the European Council, taking into consideration only the European political parties to which the members of the European Council are affiliated does not always provide a full picture of the political reality.

At the beginning of 2022, 18 EU heads of government in the European Council led a coalition government in their Member State, including a total of 68 different national parties (see Table 3). As they need to take the views of their coalition partner(s) into account, they cannot follow their own party line to the same degree as if they were the head of a single-party government.

Former European Council President Herman Van Rompuy stated that, in the European Council, 'we have to agree not with 28 leaders, we have to agree with potentially 60 or 70 leaders'.⁴³ This multitude of actors behind the scenes is, of course, another argument for the important role of European political parties as vertical, horizontal and diagonal coordinators.

Table 3 – National political parties that are part of Member State governments and their affiliation to European political parties and/or political groups in the EP

MS	HoG in EU CO	No of parties	Party and group affiliation of HoG (1)/ Coalition partners (2-7)										Head of Government (HoG) and national political party names				
			1		2		3		4		5			6		7	
			p	g	p	g	p	g	p	g	p	g	p	g	p	g	
BE	Yes	7	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1. Alexander de Croo, Open VLD 2. Belgian Socialist P. 3. RM 4. Ecolo 5. C&D 6. Forward 7. Groen
BG	Yes	4	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			1. Kiril Petkov, PP (electoral alliance of VOLT, SEC and PDS) 2. BSP 3. ITN 4. DB (electoral alliance of DSB, Yes Bulgaria and the Green Movement)
CZ	Yes	5	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●					1. Petr Fiala, ODS 2. Pirati 3. STAN 4. TOP 09 5. KDU-ČSL
DK	Yes	1	●	●													1. Mette Frederiksen, The Social Democrats
DE	Yes	3	●	●	●	●	●	●									1. Olaf Scholz, SPD 2. Grüne 3. FDP
EE	Yes	2	●	●	●	●											1. Kaja Kallas, The Estonian Center Party 2. Reform
IE	Yes	3	●	●	●	●	●	●									1. Micheál Martin/ Fianna Fail 2. Fine Gael 3. Green Party
EL	Yes	1	●	●													1. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, New Democracy
ES	Yes	5	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●					1. Pedro Sánchez /PSOE, 2. PSC 3. Podemos 4. United Left 5. PCE
FR	No	1	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●					1. Jean Castex, La République En Marche! 2. MoDem 3. RAD 4. Agir 5. TDP
HR	Yes	2	●	●	●	●											1. Andrej Plenković, HDZ 2. SDSS
IT	Yes	6	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1. Mario Draghi, Independent 2. Lega 3. Partito Democratico 4. Forza Italia 5. Italia Viva 6. Articolo Uno 7. Movimento 5 Stelle
CY	Yes	1	●	●													1. Nicos Anastasiades, DISY
LV	Yes	5	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			1. Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš, New Unity 2. AP! 3. JKP 4. KPV LV 5. NA
LT	No	3	●	●	●	●	●	●									1. Ingrida Šimonytė, Homeland Union 2. Liberal Movement 3. Freedom Party
LU	Yes	3	●	●	●	●	●	●									1. Xavier Bettel, Democratic Party 2. Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party 3. The Greens
HU	Yes	2	●	●	●	●											1. Viktor Orbán, Fidesz 2. KDNP
MT	Yes	1	●	●													1. Robert Abela, Partit Laburista
NL	Yes	5	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●							1. Mark Rutte, VVD 2. CDA 3. D66 4. CU
AT	Yes	2	●	●	●	●											1. Karl Nehammer, ÖVP 2. Die Grünen
PL	Yes	3	●	●	●	●	●	●									1. Mateusz Morawiecki, PiS 2. Porozumienie 3. Solidarna Polska
PT	Yes	1	●	●													1. Antonio Costa, Partido Socialista
RO	No	3	●	●	●	●	●	●									1. Florin Cițu, PNL 2. USR PLUS, RMDSZ
SI	Yes	3	●	●	●	●	●	●									1. Janez Janša, EPP 2. SMC 3. N.SI
SK	Yes	3	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●							1. Eduard Heger, OĽaNO 2. SR 3. SaS 4. ZĽ
FI	Yes	5	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●					1. Sanna Marin, Social Democratic Party of Finland 2. Centre Party 3. Left Alliance 4. VIHR 5. SFPRKP
SE	Yes	1	●	●													1. Magdalena Andersson, SAP

European political party (p)

- EPP
- PES
- ALDE
- European Green Party
- ID
- ECR
- The European Left
- No affiliation
- Independent
- European Democratic Party

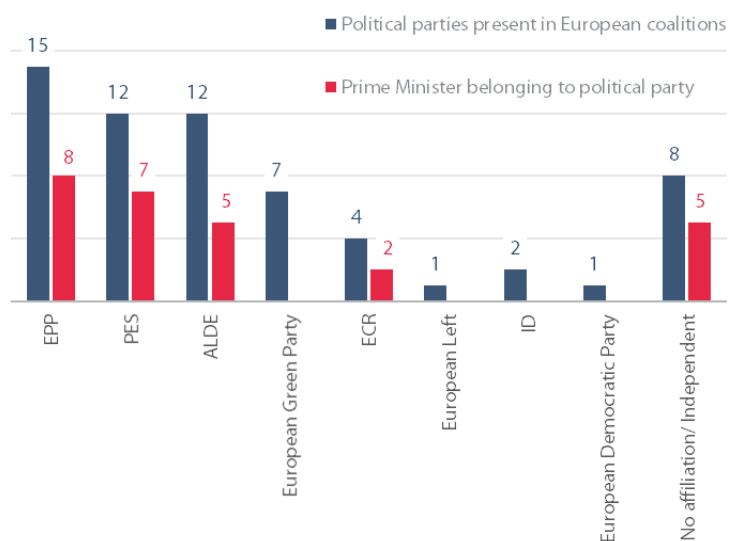
Political group in the European Parliament (g)

- EPP
- S&D
- Renew Europe
- Greens/ EFA
- ID
- ECR
- The Left
- NI
- Independent

Source: EPRS.

The analysis confirms the tendency to have more coalition governments (with an increased number of parties) in the EU than in the past, with only Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Malta, Portugal, Sweden and France⁴⁴ currently not having a coalition government.

Figure 11 – Number of Member States with affiliates of European political parties in government



Source: EPRS.

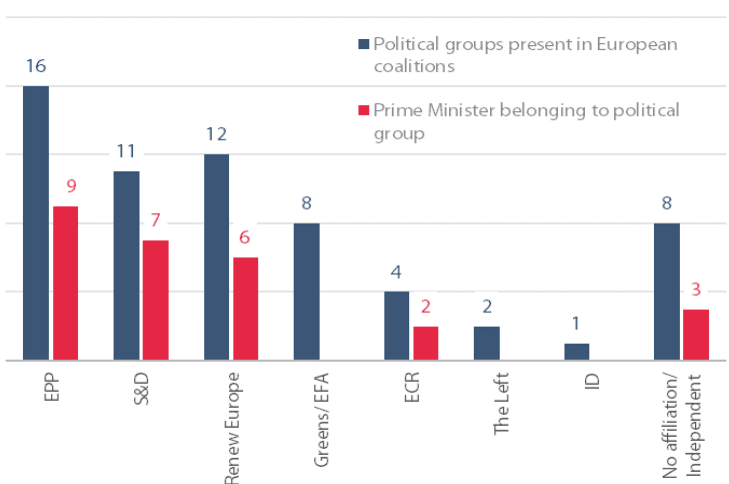
The analysis of this data by European political party illustrates that the affiliates of European political parties participate in many more Member State governments than only those where they hold the office of prime minister.

While, for some European political parties, the difference between the number of prime ministers affiliated to them and the number of coalition governments to which their affiliates belong is rather small, such as for the ECR, in other cases it is wider. For example, EPP members provide the head of government in eight countries, but they take part in

15 national governments. The difference is even more significant in the case of the Green party, which has no members in the European Council, but is part of eight national governments.

The data also show that, in 12 Member States, the national government includes numerous parties that are affiliated to the same European political party, notably in Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and the Netherlands.

Figure 12 – Number of Member States with affiliates of European political groups in government



Source: EPRS.

As outlined above, political parties are not equal to the political groups in the EP, nor is their membership. Thus, when examining the national political parties in coalition governments, one sees a slightly varied picture. Some of the main differences are that:

- i) the EPP group has nine instead of eight affiliated prime ministers;
- ii) the liberal family has six instead of five affiliated heads of government;
- iii) the Green group has national affiliates in nine Member State governments (see also Table 3).

In the past, there have been occasions where prime ministers could not take decisions in the European Council because their coalition partners did not agree. It has even happened that prime ministers of coalition governments accepted, for reasons of solidarity and the need for consensus, decisions in the European Council, knowing very well that this would end their coalition government at home and cost them their job.⁴⁵ One such example was the [break-up](#) of the Slovakian Government in 2009 over European Council decisions during the euro crisis and the subsequent loss of office for the Prime Minister Iveta Radicova.

Another telling example of the influence of a junior coalition partner on the position of a Member State in the European Council was the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as European Council nominee for the office of European Commission President. Due to the particular views of her coalition partner, the German Social Democrats (SPD), the then German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, could not formally endorse a candidate from her own country and her national party (CDU). The then President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, [reported](#) that Germany had abstained on the candidate for Commission President 'due to some issues in the coalition government, while personally Chancellor Merkel supported the whole package'.

The appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as candidate for European Commission President not only provides an example of the influence of political parties in coalition governments, but also constitutes an ideal case study for the activities of European political parties in the workings of the European Council and will be examined in Chapter 4.

3. European political parties' coordination in the context of European Council meetings

Having analysed the party political affiliation of EU Heads of State or Government in the European Council and the changes over time, this chapter will look at how the three largest and oldest European political parties – the EPP, the PES and ALDE – carry out coordination activities with regard to the European Council.⁴⁶

3.1. Pre-summits

3.1.1. Historical development

The main activity of the political families in relation to the European Council is clearly the holding of a meeting of the parties' leaders immediately before European Council meetings, known as 'pre-summits'. The holding of such pre-summits is nearly as old as the European political parties themselves.

Academics have made an overview of the first pre-summit meetings, which initially were neither regular nor institutionalised. The Socialists had their first pre-summit meeting in 1974, the EPP in 1980. The frequency of these meetings increased in the late 1980s due to the increasing European integration process and the role played by the European Council in this context. The 1990s saw the first pre-summit meetings organised by ELDR, the predecessor of ALDE.⁴⁷

In the early years, these meetings took place on an irregular basis and there was no clear distinction between meetings of the parties' political leadership and meetings dedicated to a specific European Council meeting including only the members of the European Council at that point in time. At different periods, and for different reasons (e.g. the increasing number of members of the European Council being affiliated to a European political party, the growing role of European political parties, the increased number of meetings of the European Council, or a stronger initiative from the leadership of a given European party), the various political parties relaunched and formalised their activities with respect to the European Council.

Today, all three major European political parties place a high significance on pre-summit meetings. The EPP [advertises](#) their 'EPP Summit' as 'the most important event for the EPP'. Consequently, observers argue that, for the EPP, the pre-European Council meetings 'lie at the heart of its political machine'.⁴⁸ Their importance was already entrenched by former, and long-serving, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and former Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens, who was EPP President from 1990 to 2013. They established the principle that attendance of EPP summits was mandatory, and that line has been followed ever since, with Angela Merkel never missing one.⁴⁹

ALDE reported that the party introduced regular pre-summit meetings with prime ministers in 2003; until then, ALDE had organised 'leaders meetings' (among the chairs of their national parties). For the party, this was also the beginning of an increased focus on the European Council, with pre-summits becoming more institutionalised over time and their agendas more focused on the European Council's agenda.

For the PES, the election in 2004 of former Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen saw the beginning of a stronger approach aimed at turning the party into a real actor, among other European parties, and formalising the relationship with prime ministers. As of 2007, a pre-summit took place twice a year and, since 2014, a preparatory meeting has been organised for nearly every European Council meeting (see Figure 13 below). The party refers to them either as a '[European Council preparation meeting](#)', a '[PES Pre Council meeting](#)', or a '[PES EU Council Preparation Meeting](#)'.

3.1.2. Institutionalisation of pre-summits

While the level of formality of pre-summit meetings is reported to vary between the three political families, all of them have institutionalised these meetings over time. The EPP is the only European political party that refers to pre-summits in its [statutes](#), an addition included on the initiative of former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and that defines their competence and composition in its [internal regulations](#). Nevertheless, all parties also have other, often statutory, formats bringing the leaders of their affiliated parties together, but not specifically for the European Council. Examples include the PES [Leaders Conference](#) and the [ALDE Party Leaders in Government](#) meeting.

Both academics and participants categorise EPP pre-summits as more structured and formal (with an invitation letter, agenda and minutes), with those of the Socialists and ALDE/Renew Europe⁵⁰ being less structured/formal.⁵¹

3.1.3. Functions of the pre-summits

Pre-summits ahead of European Council meetings serve multiple purposes for European political parties, including the coordination of positions for the imminent European Council discussions, long-term strategising, and an opportunity for communication, socialising and networking, with the importance of each varying between the different parties. Moreover, the objectives and benefits often vary between the different participants at a pre-summit.

Coordination of positions for the imminent European Council

For some political parties, the overarching aim of these meetings is to gather the Heads of State or Government and leadership of a political family to discuss an imminent meeting of the European Council and coordinate positions on the main topics. The EPP [states](#) that the function of the EPP summit is to 'to discuss and prepare an agenda, and reach common positions, prior to meetings of the European Council'.

European political parties confirm that they often reach informal decisions on the sequencing and choreography for the European Council by agreeing between each other who will speak on which point, using which argument and/or example, and what should be avoided. Some political families occasionally have one or two leaders speaking on behalf of the other leaders from the same political family.⁵² For example, on the topic of Brexit, it was agreed that Leo Varadkar, the Irish Taoiseach at the time, was the 'EPP coordinator' who spoke in the European Council or in meetings with the President of the European Council on behalf of the EPP.

In most cases, pre-summits do not really serve (yet) the purpose of finding joint (formal) positions on policy issues. This is so for various reasons:

- Pre-summits come very late in the game, as they take place on the same day as the European Council meeting. This does not leave a lot of time to find common positions on policy and topics, if these have not been cleared in advance.
- The draft European Council conclusions have already been distributed and largely agreed.
- There are other layers of policy coordination such as geographical groups (e.g. Visegrad, Benelux), but also other forums such as Coreper (the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union) and the General Affairs Council (GAC).
- Not all prime ministers would sign a formal document.⁵³

However, if Heads of State or Government have not made up their mind yet, and if it is on a very urgent issue, there is some room for policy coordination. In any case, party representatives indicate that the coordination of policy positions has evolved over time and is a growing process, particularly in relation to pre-Council or thematic network meetings (see Section 3.2).

Conversely, institutional issues, such as the nomination of the European Commission President, have been referred to as examples for which real decisions have been made (see Chapter 4).

Long-term strategising

The EPP [statutes](#) state that ‘the EPP Summit prepares the position to be taken by the EPP Heads of State and of Government at the European Council and issues recommendations on the strategy and political orientation of the association’. PES representatives also indicate that the pre-summit meetings serve strategic reflections. Experts [argue](#) that pre-summits ‘provide a valuable opportunity for members of the European Council, senior Commissioners, and MEPs to reflect together, along political party lines, on ways of approaching items on the European Council’s agenda’.⁵⁴ This reinforces not only the view that pre-summits contribute to strategic planning by political parties regarding their activities in relation to the European Council, but also that European political parties fulfil a role of horizontal political coordination between the different EU institutions.

Socialising and networking

While all parties see pre-summits as important for socialising, for some this is the main function of pre-summits. While in the EPP new prime ministers are already known – because they have already participated in joint events (e.g. a party congress) or have been attending pre-summits due to the positions they held within the parties’ governance structure – for other parties a pre-summit provides an opportunity for long-serving prime ministers and new prime ministers from the same political family to meet. For pre-summit meetings for which the participation is less exclusive, such as those of the PES (see participants below), they provide the opportunity for Member States’ opposition leaders or prime ministers from non-EU countries to meet EU Heads of State or Government. The awareness of belonging as a political leader to a bigger political family is unifying and fosters the habit of talking to each other, also outside meetings organised by the respective European political party.⁵⁵

The pre-summit also provides an opportunity to network and hold bilateral meetings. During or in the context of a pre-summit meeting, bilateral meetings have become very frequent, with political parties having a specific room on stand-by for requests for such meetings.

Pre-summits as a communication opportunity

For all European political parties, a pre-summit also offers an opportunity to communicate to the press and via social media (for their Twitter activities around a pre-summit, see Section 3.3). Just as with other aspects of pre-summits, such as participants and attendance, party communication around pre-summit meetings has changed over time. The liberal family used to organise press conferences, but stopped them in order to maximise the little time they had to discuss between themselves and because prime ministers prefer to carry out these interviews at the European Council meetings, where more press representatives are gathered; some press representatives still attend for doorstep comments, however The PES always has doorstep interviews and gave, and sometimes still does give, press conferences at the outset of the pre-summit or at the end, involving the PES President and one prime minister.

Pre-summit meetings could also be an opportunity to issue joint statements by the prime ministers from the party family. Some political parties have tried to do this from time to time, but these attempts have mostly been abandoned for both practical and political reasons. It takes a lot of effort to agree a joint statement, which takes time, and there is no time available around pre-summits. Moreover, on many issues, there are prime ministers with diverging opinions from the mainstream, and if the aim were to have all Head of States or Government of that party signing a joint statement, this would lead to negotiations ahead of the negotiations in the European Council.

For some parties, the idea of providing prime ministers with a draft statement to sign would go against the principle of a free discussion at the pre-summit. In the case of the PES, its President makes a [statement](#) at the end of a pre-summit trying to give a reflection of the debate and on the main lines that the political family is supporting.

Pre-summits of European political families – which not only EU Heads of State or Government attend, but also, for instance, national opposition leaders – provide those other actors with the opportunity of access to the highest leaders in the EU and to communicate this to their own national audience. Likewise, for the leaders of many smaller countries it is important to be seen together with leaders from the largest EU Member States, and pre-summits provide a photo opportunity for the national press for all of them.⁵⁶

Facilitating the discussions in the European Council

Political party representatives feel that, although this is not the main function of a pre-summit, these can sometimes help to smooth discussions and to reach consensus in the subsequent meeting of the European Council.⁵⁷ While sometimes disagreements or differences in positions can already be reduced during the discussions among the respective political families ahead of a European Council meeting, the complexity in the European Council is already lessened by the fact that the majority of European Council members hail from three main political families instead of 27 different ones.

3.1.4. Participants and attendance

There are two main approaches regarding the potential participants at European political parties' pre-summits: a very exclusive approach, currently preferred by ALDE and Renew Europe, and a very inclusive approach, favoured by PES, with the EPP's approach being in the middle.

Table 4 – Categories of potential participants at pre-summit meetings of political parties

Possible type of participants	EPP	PES	ALDE/Renew Europe
Head of State or Government	√	√	√
Highest-ranking member of a national party in government and/or leaders who are not Head of State or Government	√	√	
President of the largest opposition party in each Member State	√	√	
EU institutional leaders (European Commission President, European Parliament President, European Council President, High Representative on Foreign and Security Policy)	√	√	√
European Commissioners	√	√	√
European Party President(s)	√	√	√
EP group chair	√	√	√
Secretary-General of the political party	√	√	
President of the Committee of the Regions		√	
Non-affiliated observers		√	

Source: EPRS.

The EPP [statutes](#) provide for the possible participation of the following people:

- the members of the EPP Presidency;
- the members of the European Council (Heads of State or Government);
- a Vice-President of the European Commission to represent the members of the Commission in the absence of the President, as far as he or she is a member of an EPP Ordinary Member Party;
- presidents of parties in coalition governments in EU Member States in cases where the Head of Government is not a member of an EPP Ordinary Member Party;
- the president of the largest opposition party in each EU Member State;
- where EPP Ordinary Member Parties are candidates only in complementary regions (i.e. in different regions of a Member State), the president of each party is invited (e.g. the CSU in Germany);
- the President has the right to invite other persons to the meetings of the EPP Summit;
- in practice, the Secretary-General of the EPP group also attends the meetings.

Regarding the number of participants at EPP pre-summits, Helmut Kohl wanted to reduce the participants to only Heads of State or Government. However, to increase the activity of some national political leaders in the governance bodies of the EPP, it was agreed to follow a more inclusive approach, letting them attend in their function as Vice-Presidents of the EPP, if they would take on active roles. Over the years, the approach varied sometimes between being more exclusive and more inclusive, depending on the demand of European Council members for more exclusivity and the pressure from non-European Council members also to attend those meetings.⁵⁸

It is interesting to see that some political parties have undergone contrary developments over time. While the ALDE approach used to be more inclusive, with guests such as leaders of national opposition parties from their party family attending, since 2003 ALDE pre-summits are only for members of the European Council and the party leadership.⁵⁹ Yet, as a result of the creation of Renew Europe, and with the group in the EP taking over the hosting of the pre-summits, the participation has slightly increased (e.g. by also including the Renaissance party president in addition to the presidents of ALDE and EDF). While EU Heads of State or Government from the liberal family have a 'plus one' option to bring advisers to the building, these do not sit in the meeting room. The Secretary-General is also in the building, but does not sit at the leaders' discussion table. ALDE has other formats that bring a larger group of ALDE-affiliated national political leaders together, such as the [ALDE Party Leaders in Government](#) meetings.

PES pre-summit meetings have always been very inclusive, including:

- Heads of State or Government;
- the President of PES;
- the PES Secretary-General;
- deputy prime ministers, where PES affiliates are in government (e.g. Olaf Scholz in Germany, previously) or important figures of the national party in government (e.g. Paul Magnette in Belgium);
- automatic guests, such as: the leader of the S&D group; the President of the EP (if he or she is affiliated to the political family); European Commissioners;
- other guests: opposition party leaders, when elections are occurring soon in that country, which aim to give them visibility; prime ministers from other European political parties (e.g. former [Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras](#) or the former President of Cyprus, Dimitris Christofias); the [President of the Committee of the Regions](#); from time to time, [prime ministers from accession countries](#).

Up until 2012, PES-affiliated EU Heads of State or Government attended pre-summits alone; since then, they can be accompanied by one additional person, the secretary of state or their sherpa. Today, they sometimes bring both. These people are also in the room, but not sitting at the main table. PES's inclusive approach is also based on the philosophy of overcoming silos, where the risk is to only coordinate among prime ministers or only among Commissioners.⁶⁰ It aims to connect the various party affiliates in different EU institutions and across the Member States, thereby achieving horizontal, vertical and diagonal coordination.

In practice, the attendance for all European political parties is, most of the time, lower than formally possible (i.e. not everyone who could participate does actually attend). Academics highlighted that, in the past, the social democrats had difficulties in ensuring the attendance of all of their Heads of State or Government at pre-summit meetings, with regular prominent absentees being Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder.⁶¹

Participants confirm that getting all affiliated Heads of State or Government to attend European Council pre-summits is still more problematic for some parties than for others, with the EPP being the one among the three main parties that seems to be able to ensure the highest attendance rate over time; but the other two political families are nowadays not far off. The participation of prominent figures in the European political family such as the former French President, François Hollande, the former Italian Premier, Matteo Renzi, or the former President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, also attracted other EU leaders, motivating them to participate at pre-summit meetings.

The increased attendance is probably linked to the importance current prime ministers place on meetings with peers from their own political family. ALDE reports that, back in 2003, when the pre-meetings first started, it was a top-down approach by the ALDE party leadership to organise these meetings, while today it is very much a process driven by demand from the affiliated prime ministers.

PES representatives report that their prime ministers not only demand more pre-summit type meetings, but that some of them would even prefer, for efficiency reasons, to meet from time to time only among the members of the European Council. Sometimes this type of more reduced meeting has taken place in the context of pre-summits or at meetings in the Member States (e.g. twice in Paris in 2016, organised by the Elysée).

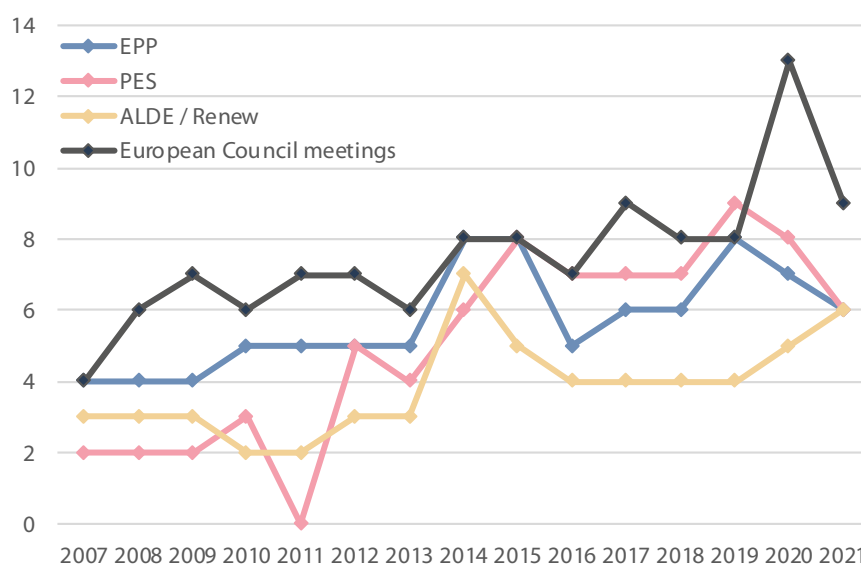
Liberal prime ministers sometimes organise meetings without their group or party to coordinate among themselves. One example was a meeting in the margins of the ALDE/Renew Europe pre-summit, ahead of the informal working dinner of the members of the European Council in Slovenia on 5 October 2021.⁶²

Examining the available information (such as party press releases) shows that attendance at physical EPP summits in recent years represented, on average, between 17 and 26 announced main participants.⁶³ Publicly available information for the PES shows that attendance at their meetings varied between 17 and 30 confirmed participants between March 2019 and March 2020 (not counting the 'plus one' options).⁶⁴ Based on available information, there were between 13 and 17 main participants at the ALDE pre-summit meetings in the period between December 2015 and June 2021.⁶⁵

3.1.5. Number of pre-summits

Around 2012, all three main European political parties started increasing the number of pre-summits held in the context of European Council meetings. Figure 13 shows the number of European Council meetings each year since 2007 and the corresponding pre-summit meetings of the European political parties.⁶⁶ The comparison between the different political parties enables a number of conclusions to be drawn:

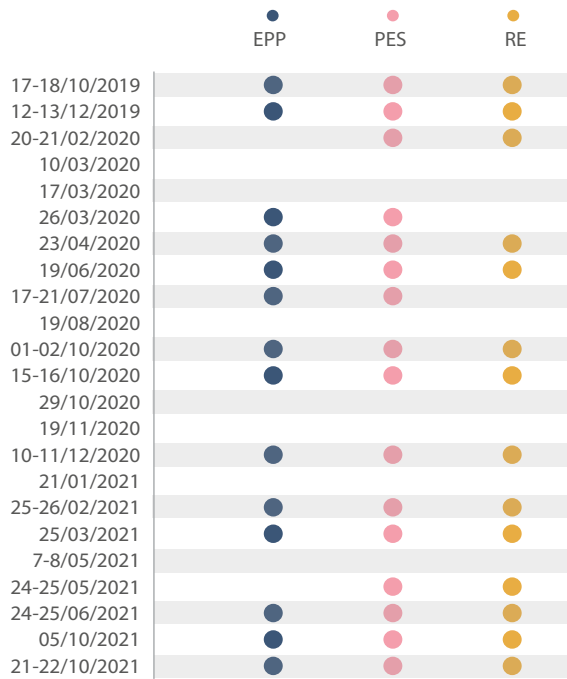
Figure 13 – Pre-summit meetings held in the context of European Council meetings (2007-2021)



Source: EPRS, based partially on information from political parties.

- The number of pre-summits per year have, on average, steadily increased for all parties. For observers, this greater number of pre-summits and the higher attendance thereof seems to indicate an increased politicisation of the EU.⁶⁷
- For the PES, the number of pre-summits not only increased as an absolute number but also in relation to the total number of European Council meetings. In 2019, the number of PES pre-summits actually exceeded the number of European Council meetings, as the PES held two pre-summits before and during the 30 June-3 July European Council.
- The absence of any PES pre-summits in 2011 could be explained by the fact that the PES changed its President that year and that the party's activities probably concentrated on organising the election of their next President and of a new Secretary-General the following year.
- Since 2015, the PES has organised the highest number of pre-summits every year. This may seem an unexpected observation, as their communication about their pre-summits is less visual than that of other parties.
- The pre-summits of PES and the EPP covered, most of the time, all formal European Council meetings in a year.
- As ALDE's average after 2015 is around four pre-summits a year, it seems that ALDE mainly holds pre-summits for regular European Council meetings, while the PES and the EPP also hold many pre-summits before informal European Council meetings.
- The coronavirus crisis clearly changed the trends of previous years. While ALDE increased its pre-summit meetings (also due to the increased number of European Council meetings in these years), the EPP and the PES had substantially fewer pre-summit meetings than in recent years.

Figure 14 – Pre-summit meetings held in the context of European Council meetings between October 2019 and October 2021



Source: EPRS.

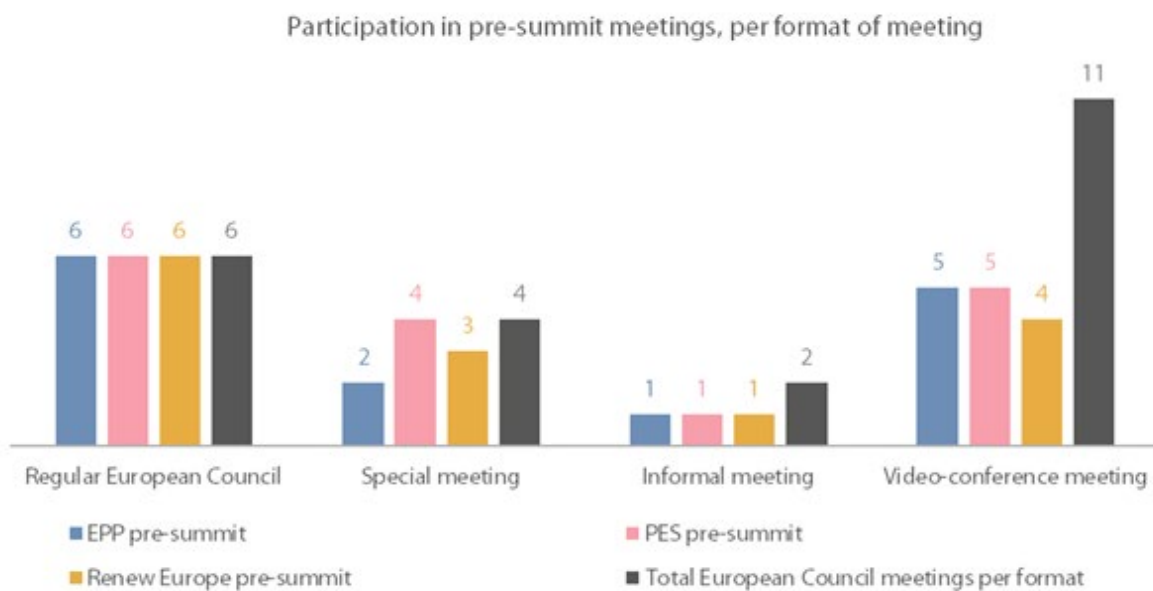
Figure 14 shows how often the EPP, the PES and Renew Europe held pre-summit meetings between October 2019 and October 2021.⁶⁸

The data show that all three have held nearly the same number of pre-summits. With 16 pre-summits, the PES organised the highest number of meetings in this period, while the EPP and Renew Europe both hosted 14 confirmed pre-summits.

In terms of which European Council meetings were preceded by pre-summits organised by the various political families, and which meetings were not, one sees a large consistency between the three families. In most cases, when a European Council was not preceded by a pre-summit (seven occasions), none of the three hosted a pre-summit; on only three occasions did some political families host a pre-summit, while others did not.

Figure 15 classifies the pre-summits of the political families by type of corresponding European Council meeting: regular, special, informal dinner, and video-conference.

Figure 15 – Pre-summit meetings by type of European Council meeting between October 2019 and October 2021



Source: EPRS.

The analysis shows that:

- All European parties held a pre-summit for the six regular in-person European Council meetings.
- For the four in-person special meetings, the PES was the only European political party to organise a pre-summit everytime, with the EPP holding two pre-summits and Renew Europe three. The assumed absence of an EPP pre-summit ahead of the 20-21 February 2020 special European Council meeting on the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework is particularly interesting. On the one hand, it is surprising that, for such a potentially important meeting (i.e. the attempted agreement on the next MFF), the EPP would not try to coordinate its Heads of State or Government. On the other hand, the absence of a pre-summit could also confirm that, for MFF-related questions, other dividing lines take precedence over party political ones.
- As regards the 11 video-conferences held by the EU leaders in the period observed (October 2019-October 2021), European political families held (online) pre-summits at less than half of them (five for PES and EPP, and four for Renew Europe).
- While the informal dinner meeting of EU Heads of State or Government in Brno in October 2021 was used by the EPP and the PES to hold a pre-summit,⁶⁹ the informal dinner of EU Heads of State or Government in Porto in May 2021 was not used by any party for a pre-summit meeting. However, some used the occasion for ‘leaders meetings’ or party conventions.
- Overall, the total number of pre-summits held in that period was very similar among European political families (PES 16, EPP and Renew Europe 14) and in fact equal when considering only regular European Council meetings.

Pre-summits during the Covid-19 pandemic

All political families tried to continue the pre-summit meetings process as well as possible during the peak of the pandemic, with varying regularity.⁷⁰ Holding pre-summits online had the potential to increase the overall number of participants (also with their advisers in the room). At its online pre-summit on [26 March 2020](#), the PES counted 30 participants (not counting advisers). At the same time, online meetings often reduced the participation of many high-level participants. For example, only one of the six PES members of the European Council participated in the 26 March 2020 pre-summit, confirming the low interest of prime ministers in online meetings. A [tweet](#) on the EPP’s online pre-summit in February 2021 also indicated that a lot fewer prime ministers and heads of state participated than usually at a pre-summit. Feedback from all main European political parties confirm that the political leaders are not too fond of having these virtual meetings, as they limit many of the benefits of the physical meetings, notably the limitation of participants, bilateral break-out meetings and the possibility to speak just ‘amongst peers’.⁷¹

3.2. Pre-council and ministerial meetings

European Council meetings cannot be assessed without considering the wider context of the preparatory activities in the Council (GAC and Coreper). Equally, to fully appreciate the coordination activities of European political parties as regards European Council meetings, the pre-summits of the European political families should also be seen amid complementary and preparatory activities by European political parties at the level of national ministers.

In addition to their pre-summit meetings, over the years European political parties have built up pre-Council or ministerial meetings (where normally only those national affiliates holding a ministerial post in the national governments participate). These ministerial meetings have developed more recently than the pre-summit meetings, and the EPP even [refers](#) to them as the ‘offshoot’ of their pre-summit meetings.

The EPP, for example, started in 2007 to hold such meetings prior to the meetings of the Council of the EU and currently has at least [10 different formats](#) (foreign affairs, defence, general affairs, economic and financial affairs, interior affairs, justice, agriculture, energy, health, and trade). ALDE started in 2015 with formats for telecoms, transport, [agriculture and fisheries](#), and recently expanded them to general affairs and competition. The historically strongest and oldest PES pre-Council formats are EPSCO and ECOFIN, but the PES has recently added others, notably general affairs, agriculture, competition and education pre-Council meetings.

Political parties stress the importance of ministerial meetings in preparation for pre-summits as they [prepare the debate](#), establish common policy positions and identify the hot topics for the European Council and corresponding pre-summits. These meetings are another example of European political parties' diagonal, horizontal and vertical coordination activities, as they include not only their affiliates from the different Member States but also representatives from the political group in the EP and often Commissioners.

Party representatives indicate that the policy coordination at these meetings is a lot stronger than at the pre-summit meetings with the prime ministers. The EPP describes the function of these ministerial meetings as aiming to 'harmonise the positions of EPP ministers towards the full meeting of the Council; and drafting declarations and resolutions'. Similarly, PES ministers very often make joint statements on policy issues at their pre-Council meetings.

3.3. Twitter communication by European political families on the European Council and on the pre-summit meetings

Social media, and notably Twitter, has become an additional important communication tool for politicians and political parties. While taking into consideration that it is only one form of communication, examining the Twitter activities of European political parties can illustrate their growing activism in the context of the European Council and its meetings.

This section will analyse how the three main European political families, both parties and groups, tweet about the European Council and their related activities. The analysis will start by examining the general use of Twitter by political families and the share of European Council-related tweets in their overall Twitter activity, before looking at the main topics each political family tweets about in the context of the European Council.

As outlined above, one of the functions, although not the main one, of the pre-summits of European political parties is to create media events and to communicate their views and political positions. Consequently, particular focus will be placed on the Twitter activities of European political parties and political groups in the European Parliament before, during and after their pre-summit meetings. While focusing mainly on the Twitter activities of European political parties, the section will also briefly outline if and how European political parties are mentioned in the tweets of EU leaders in the European Council.

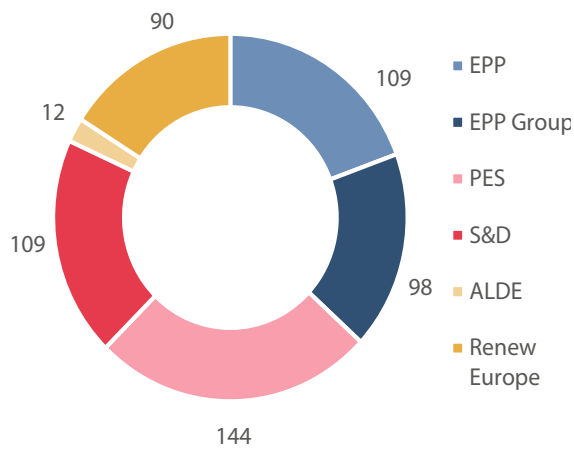
3.3.1. Total use of Twitter

The data collected for this study, covering the period from October 2019 to October 2021,⁷² show that, in all three cases, it is the group which tweets more on average than the corresponding party does. However, the difference varies substantially. While the EPP group tweeted on average 292 times per month, the EPP party tweets only 60 times. For the social democratic family, the difference is smaller, with the S&D group tweeting 200 times on average per month and the PES 176 per month. For the same period, Renew Europe has issued 246 tweets on average a month, while ALDE tweeted 131 times.

The data also show that the selected European political parties and political groups in the European Parliament all tweet more than the average EU Heads of State or Government, who on average tweet 50 times a month.⁷³

3.3.2. Relation between total tweets and tweets on the European Council

Figure 16 – Total EUCO tweets

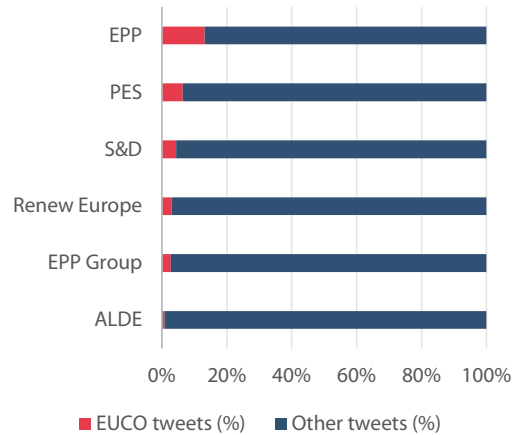


Source: EPRS.

When examining the total European Council-related tweets by the EPP, the PES and ALDE, and their respective political groups in the European Parliament, the analysis shows that, in absolute terms, the PES tweets most on the European Council, followed in joint second place by the EPP party and the S&D group. Close behind are the EPP group and the Renew Europe group, while the one that tweets least by far on the European Council is ALDE.

When considering not the total numbers, but the European Council-related tweets as a percentage of all tweets made by each party or group, the picture changes. Figure 17 shows that, while the EPP has the lowest number of total tweets, it has the highest percentage related to the European Council. Proportionately, the PES tweets more on the European Council than the S&D group; for the liberal family, it is the other way around, with the party tweeting less than the political group.

Figure 17 – European Council-related tweets as a percentage of total tweets, by party and group



Source: EPRS.

3.3.3. Main issues in European Council-related tweets by political families

Table 5 – Top five topics by party and group, October 2019 to October 2021⁷⁴

	Topic No 1	Topic No 2	Topic No 3	Topic No 4	Topic No 5
EPP	Pre-summit 74 %	External policy 20 %	Western Balkans 11 %	Covid-19 10 %	Enlargement 9 %
PES	Pre-summit 52 %	Social policy 32 %	Economic policy 28 %	MFF 15 %	Rule of law 13 %
ALDE	Pre-summit 92 %	Western Balkans 33 %	Enlargement 25 %	Rule of law 14 %	Energy 8 %
EPP Group	MFF 70 %	EP plenary 60 %	External policy 46 %	Rule of law 44 %	Next Generation EU 35 %
S&D	EP plenary 74 %	MFF 50 %	Social policy 38 %	Pre-summit 35 %	Climate policy 27 %
Renew Europe	Pre-summit 77 %	Rule of law 18 %	Climate policy 14 %	Covid-19 14 %	External policy 14 %

Source: EPRS.

Table 5 shows the five main topics mentioned in the tweets by the political families in the context of the European Council. The analysis shows that, for all political parties, the main issue mentioned in their tweets are the respective pre-summits of their political family.

When looking at the political groups, one sees a different focus. While Renew Europe – which, as was mentioned earlier, organises the pre-summits for its political family – also had the pre-summit as the main topic, the other two groups tweeted less often about it. Conversely, the EPP group and the S&D group both had the EP plenary debate on the European Council and the MFF as their two main topics, just in reverse order. The one topic that appeared in the top five issues of all parties and groups analysed was the rule of law.

When comparing the top five issues of each European political party with the top five issues of their corresponding political group, the analysis shows a limited overlap. While there is an overlap of three issues between the PES and the S&D, the overlap between ALDE and Renew Europe is only on two issues and between the EPP and the EPP group only on one issue.

The breakdown by individual topic, beyond the top five, is further detailed in Table 6.

Table 6 – Overview of topics addressed by each European political party and group

	 1-9%	 10-19%	 20-49%	 >50%	EPP party	EPP group	PES	S&D	ALDE	Renew Europe
MFF										
Energy										
Climate policy										
Enlargement										
Migration										
Agriculture and fisheries										
Economic policy										
Next Generation EU										
Cybersecurity										
Innovation										
Industrial policy										
Trade										
Social policy										
Single Market										
Jobs and growth										
Rule of law										
Terrorism										
Security and defence										
Digital policy										
Cohesion policy										
Health										
Brexit										
Future of Europe										
Covid-19										
EP Plenary										
Pre-summit										
Council presidency										
Eastern Partnership										
Western Balkans										
External policy										

Source: EPRS.

The analysis shows that political group tweets include a higher variety of issues (S&D – 27 issues, EPP group – 26, and Renew Europe – 23) than those of the European political parties (EPP – 20 issues, PES – 17, and ALDE – 8).

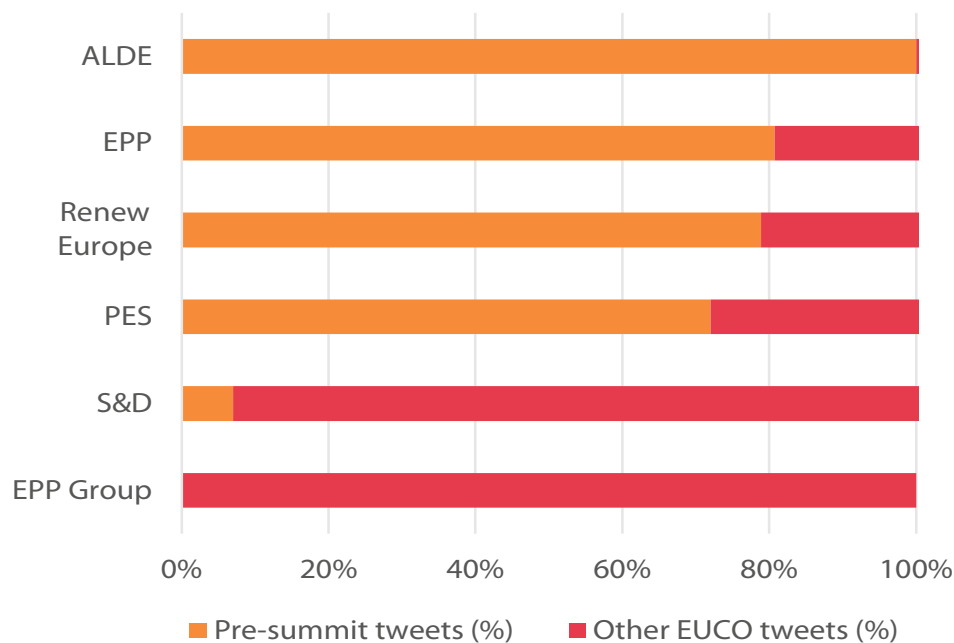
The issues about which all groups and parties tweeted were energy, enlargement, the rule of law, the Eastern Partnership and external policy. Issues on which only one or two of them tweeted were agriculture and fisheries, cohesion policy, cybersecurity, terrorism, and health.

3.3.4. Pre-summit related tweets

As outlined above, the pre-summits are major coordination activities by European political families around European Council meetings. When examining the percentage of tweets concentrating on pre-summits in relation to the overall European Council-related tweets (see Figure 18), there are several interesting findings:

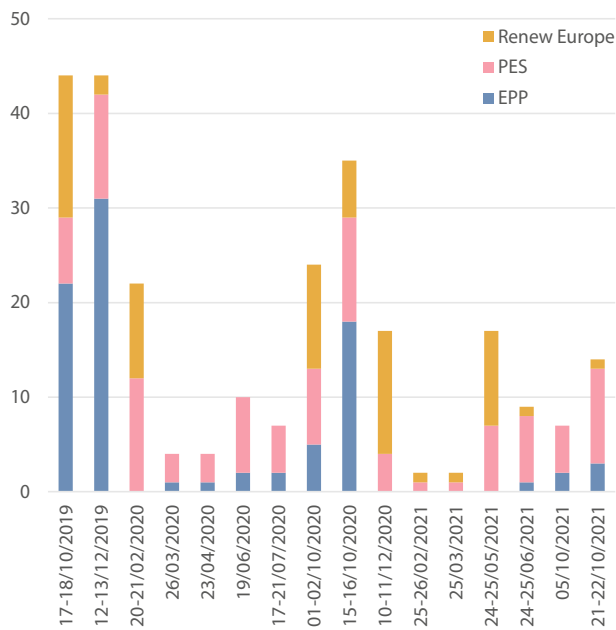
- The ALDE party only tweets on pre-summits, i.e. they do not tweet on the European Council outside the context of pre-summits.
- The EPP group does not tweet at all on the pre-summits, which could indicate a clear separation between group and party on communication activities regarding pre-summits.
- The S&D and the PES differ markedly in their focus on pre-summits as part of their overall European Council-related tweets: the former tweet less than 10% and the latter over 70% of their European Council-related tweets about pre-summit meetings.

Figure 18 – Pre-summit tweets/Other EUCO tweets, per party and group



Source: EPRS.

Figure 19 – Total pre-summit tweets by pre-summit meeting host



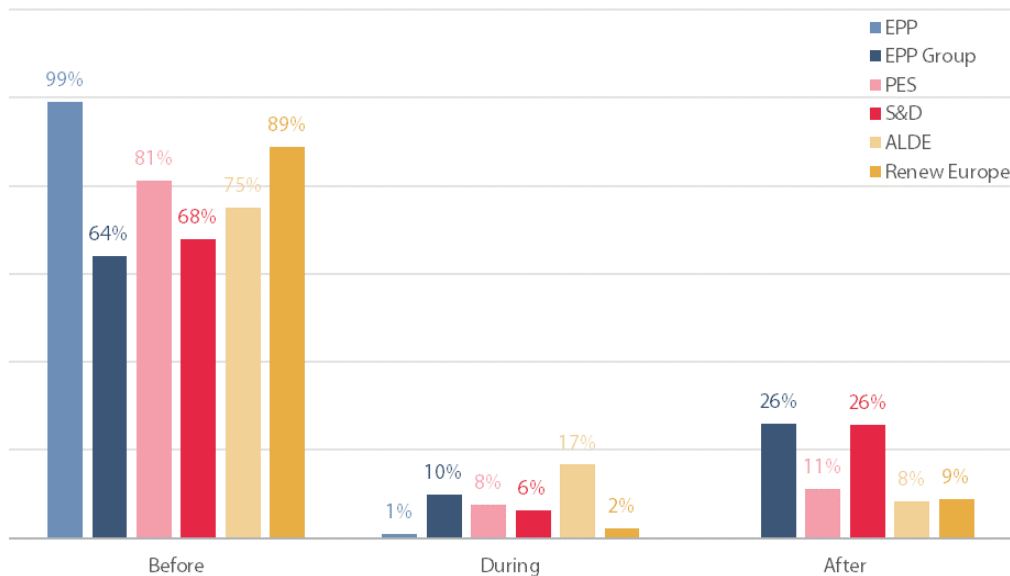
Source: EPRS.

As these figures concern the total amount of tweets over a two-year period, it is worth breaking them down by the number of tweets for each pre-summit event related to a European Council meeting.

Assessing the tweets of the hosts of the pre-summit events (i.e. the EPP party, the PES and Renew Europe), one sees that the PES had tweets about all of its pre-summits. Renew Europe and the EPP party tweeted less regularly about their pre-summits, with some not being tweeted about at all (this was the case for Renew Europe’s pre-summits on 23 April and 19 June 2020, and the EPP party’s pre-summits in December 2020 and March 2021). The analysis also shows that the EPP party tweeted from only three pre-summit meetings, equal to 80 % of their overall pre-summit tweets.

Figure 20 clusters the European Council-related tweets of the political family in relation to their relative timing (i.e. before, during or after the meeting).

Figure 20 – Timing of European Council-related tweets



Source: EPRS.

3.3.6. Twitter activities of EU leaders on European political parties

Examining the tweets of EU leaders on European political parties can provide an additional indicator to illustrate the EU Heads of State or Government's recognition of the increased role of European political parties at EU level, notably regarding the European Council.

Previous EPRS research on the [Twitter activity of the members of the European Council](#) for the period January 2019 to June 2020 had shown that, while not a major issue in their Twitter activity (1.3%), 19 of the 34 EU leaders examined had tweeted about interaction within, but also between, European political parties and/or the European political groups in the European Parliament.

The former Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, was by far the most active on this issue (26 tweets), followed by the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez (12), the President of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades (7), the Prime Minister of Latvia, Krišjānis Kariņš (6), the former Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Boyko Borissov (6) and the Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis (6). With the exception of Pedro Sánchez, all the others are members of the EPP political family. However, if tweets regarding European political parties are taken as a percentage of their total European tweets, Boyko Borissov (16%), Leo Varadkar (8%), and the Prime Minister of Finland, Sanna Marin (6%), were most active.

As a result of majority patterns during the period under analysis, more EU leaders from the EPP family sat in the European Council than from other political families at that time. This could provide an explanation for the numbers of overall tweets on each European political party by EU leaders; these focused extensively on the EPP, which had a share of around 66% of all such tweets on European political parties, while the S&D political family was the subject of around 18% of these tweets and the Renew Europe family was the subject of 6.8% of them. Some of the tweets (5.7%) referred to the various political families or political groups in the European Parliament in general. Another explanation for the substantial number of tweets on the EPP is that EPP-affiliated EU Heads of State or Government have largely integrated their European political party into their Twitter discourse.

Very often, tweets about European political parties concerned their summits, which often preceded European Council meetings, as well as stand-alone meetings. Other tweets concerned meetings of EU Heads of State or Government, or support for a specific lead candidate from a European political party for the position of President of the European Commission, or the negotiations between representatives of the European political parties on the package of EU top jobs.

4. European political parties in the context of nominating or appointing institutional leaders in the European Council

Do European political parties matter in the choice of the EU's institutional leadership? And if so, has their involvement, particularly in the context of the European Council, developed over recent institutional cycles? To answer these questions, this chapter will examine the case study of the EU's new institutional leadership in July 2019. Before doing so, it will present the academic debate on the influence of political parties on the European Council's decisions and action, followed by an overview of the balance of European party families in the European Council during previous nominations of the EU's institutional leadership in 2009 and 2014.

4.1. Literature review on the influence of European political parties on the outcomes of European Council meetings

A number of academics who carry out research on European political parties have also examined whether they have an impact on decisions (related to policy or treaty changes) of the European Council.⁷⁵ While pointing to European political parties' limited capacity to influence government leaders' decisions on the EU's main policy orientations in the European Council,⁷⁶ they also argue that 'the strategic importance of party networks within and around the European Council facilitated negotiations and decision-making, providing an alternative or supplementary channel for influence'.⁷⁷

It is generally accepted that European parties have often been able to influence treaty reforms as well as the selection of key individuals for high-ranking EU jobs, such as the European Commission and European Council Presidents.⁷⁸ Research has concentrated particularly on how one or several European political parties have influenced EU treaty reforms; the substantial body of literature includes, for example, research on the EPP's role in relation to the Single European Act (SEA), the Maastricht Treaty, and the Amsterdam Treaty,⁷⁹ and the PES in relation to the employment chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty.⁸⁰

The conclusions of this research indicate that the impact of European political parties varies over time and issues and across party families. To establish why this is the case, academics have argued that there are three conditions for party divides to matter for the outcomes of a European Council meeting:

- 1 decision-making in the European Council is more likely to become party-politicised, the more issues are split along a left-right spectrum;
- 2 political outcomes are more likely to reflect distinct partisan preferences, the greater the dominance of one particular transnational party in the European Council;
- 3 transnational parties are more likely to influence the process and the outcome of negotiations, the greater their cohesion and capacity for mobilisation.⁸¹

As conditions 1 and 2 are not really in the hands of the European political parties and their national members, the main factor for exercising influence is their own mobilisation, which seems to have increased over the years (see Section 3.1).

In addition to the mobilisation of the party members, the internal cohesiveness of the European political parties (i.e. how similar the political positions of the various national affiliates are) is also crucial for the effectiveness of all political families. If they cannot produce a clear line due to their varying internal positions, they will be less influential on decisions made by EU institutions, notably the European Council.⁸²

Academics argue that conditions were very good for the EPP party at the time of the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty, while they were at their best possible for the PES at the time of the Amsterdam Treaty. Back then, the attendance of socialist or social democrat Heads of State or Government at PES conferences increased. For example, the party leaders' conference in Malmö in June 1997 was attended by all nine socialist or social democrat Heads of State or Government. In parallel, several PES member parties won elections, including those in the UK and France. This development changed the balance of political power in the European Council; as a result, PES leaders were successful in integrating the employment and social chapters in the Amsterdam Treaty.⁸³ Based on these results, academics argue that 'the agenda and outcomes of the treaty negotiations were to a large extent shaped through transnational (Euro) party networks'.⁸⁴

Analysts also argue that the impact of party political alliances appears more significant when the European Council debates socio-economic issues or high-level appointments. An example of the influence of European political parties in the context of socio-economic issues was the reorientation of the Lisbon Agenda, which moved towards competitiveness during a period when there was a liberal-conservative majority in the European Council. However, as issues on the agenda of the European Council are rarely split along the traditional left-right spectrum, and most European Council meetings do not deal with treaty reforms, negotiations along party lines are rather rare in the European Council.⁸⁵

Alliances between different Member States in the European Council are often issue-specific, vary over time and cut across party lines. A clear example of the importance of cross-party alliances were the 2021-2027 MFF negotiations in the European Council, on which the main dividing lines were between different groups of Member States, (frugals, Germany and France, southern Europe, eastern Europe), and each of these groups of countries included Heads of State or Government from all the main political families.⁸⁶

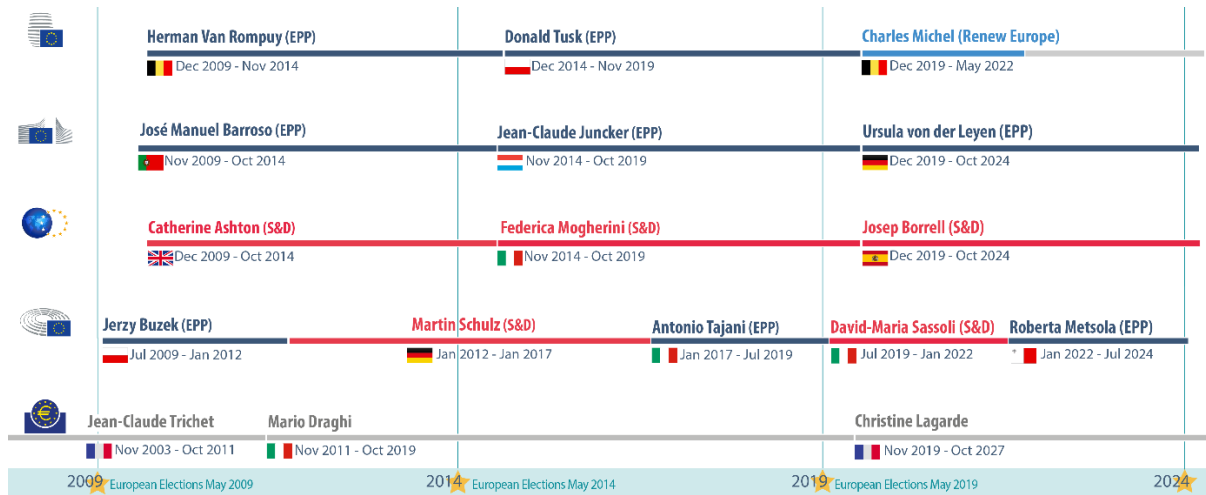
4.2. Appointing institutional leaders in the past

Before examining the selection of the EU's new institutional leadership in 2019, it is worthwhile looking briefly at the party political background of the EU's institutional leadership during previous institutional cycles.

It has been [argued](#) that, until 2004, the influence of the European political parties was almost non-existent on the decision appointing the next European Commission President. In 2004, the European People's Party organised itself for the first time and demanded that the largest party should get that position. This was the moment when party politics visibly entered the process of nominating the Commission President, and it can clearly be seen that this continued in the subsequent EU institutional cycles.

Figure 22 shows that, both in 2009 and 2014, the set of EU institutional leaders (i.e. European Council President, European Commission President, European Parliament President and High Representative) was made up entirely of people belonging either to the PES or to the EPP political family. The only high-level position for which no obvious party affiliation could be identified was for the office of President of the European Central Bank.

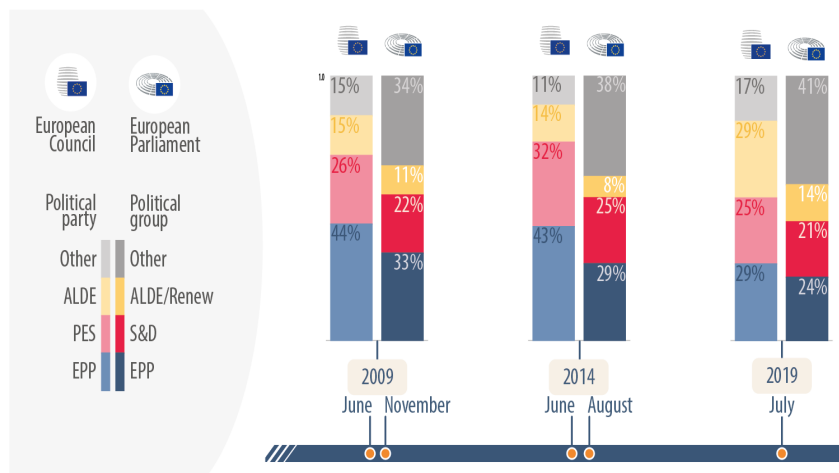
Figure 22 – Overview of high-level office holders since the 2009 EP elections and their party affiliation



Source: EPRS.

When considering the party political backgrounds of the selected leaders of the EU institutions, it confirms that the choice of the EU’s institutional leadership is also related to the candidate’s affiliation to the different European political parties, with the nominations reflecting the party-political balance in the European Council and the European Parliament at the time. Figure 23 outlines the political weight of the main European political families in the European Council and the European Parliament in 2009, 2014 and 2019.

Figure 23 – Political balance at the time of appointing the EU institutional leadership



Source: EPRS.

When EU leaders agreed to nominate José Manuel Durão Barroso for a second term as European Commission President on 18-19 June 2009, the European Council had 12 voting members that were affiliated to the EPP, seven affiliated to the PES and four affiliated to ALDE. The same political balance existed at the time that Herman Van Rompuy was elected as the European Council President in November 2009.⁸⁷

Former President Van Rompuy acknowledged that, besides his personality, being a member of the EPP helped his case. Although the President of the Commission was already from the EPP, due to the political balance in the European Council it was considered obvious that the President of the European Council should also come from the EPP. In his view, the same reasoning applied to Charles Michel’s election as European Council President in 2019. Besides his earlier performance as a member of the European Council, his election had to do with the fact that he was a liberal; as a result of the shift in the political balance in the European Council, the liberals were entitled to one of the main posts in the EU.⁸⁸

In 2014, the balance between the three main European political families was 12 for the EPP, seven for the PES and four for ALDE; the 26-27 June 2014 European Council meeting [agreed](#) to nominate Jean-Claude Juncker, a member of the EPP, as European Commission President. The subsequent [special European Council meeting on 16 July](#) did [not reach](#) an agreement on the next European Council President, but the [special European Council meeting of 30 August](#) did elect Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister, who also belonged to the EPP family. In July 2019, the numerical strength of the liberal political family reached a peak in the European Council, with eight out of 27 EU Heads of State or Government, including French President Emmanuel Macron (whose MEPs were to merge with the ALDE political group in the European Parliament to create the Renew Europe group).

Looking at the three most recent nominations of the European Council President and the European Commission President, one sees not only that the changing political balance in the European institutions had an impact on the choice of EU institutional leaders, but also that the dates of their respective appointments by the European Council became increasingly close, and in July 2019 occurred on the same day. This provides additional evidence for the assertion that the choice of the EU's political leadership has been, first and foremost, an agreement between the main political parties, taking their relative numerical strength into consideration.

4.3. Case study: European political parties' involvement in the 2019 selection of institutional leaders

4.3.1. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process

The Lisbon Treaty, which came into force in 2009, states that while 'EU leaders in the European Council propose the candidate for the President of the European Commission', they should do so while 'taking into account' the results of the European elections and 'after having held the appropriate consultations' ([Article 17\(7\) TEU](#)). To strengthen this link between the elections to the European Parliament and the nomination of the European Commission President, Parliament, in a [2012 resolution](#), urged the European political parties to 'nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission', and expressed its expectation that those candidates would play a 'leading role in the parliamentary electoral campaign'.⁸⁹

This resulted in the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (i.e. lead candidates) process, whereby European political parties would nominate candidates for the office of European Commission President.⁹⁰ These candidates would then campaign across Europe as part of the European Parliament elections, and the presidency of the Commission would go to the candidate of the European political family that gained the most votes in the elections (i.e. which would be capable of marshalling sufficient parliamentary support). This should make the nomination not only more 'political', but also give citizens more say over who should head the EU executive.⁹¹ It could also be argued that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system provided an opportunity for European political parties to strengthen their position and legitimacy in the EU's political system.⁹²

Other objectives of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process were to

- increase public interest, and consequently voter turnout, in the EP elections;
- boost the profile and the influence of the European political parties;
- strengthen the political legitimacy of the Commission President and, by association, the Commission as a whole;
- bolster the EP's institutional standing vis-à-vis the European Council, and;
- shift the constitutional nature of the EU in a more parliamentary direction by firmly tying the outcome of the elections to the selection of the head of the EU executive.⁹³

In 2014, the *Spitzenkandidaten* process was a success, as one of the lead candidates, namely Jean-Claude Juncker, the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, was nominated by the European Council, and later elected by the European Parliament, as European Commission President. An important element of this success in 2014 was that the main political groups in Parliament at that moment – the EPP, the S&D and ALDE – had expressed their support for the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, and after the election quickly agreed on Jean-Claude Juncker. Martin Schulz's role at that moment was crucial, since he, as the lead candidate for the social democrats, quickly conceded the elections to Jean-Claude Juncker. Observers explain this behaviour by underlining that, for Martin Schulz, 'Parliament came before party, and a speedy victory by the European Parliament over the European Council was therefore more important than a protracted struggle between the parties'.⁹⁴

With a view to the new institutional cycle starting in 2019, just like in 2014, the European political parties nominated *Spitzenkandidaten* who would run election campaigns as candidates for the office of European Commission President. However, they did so much earlier this time around, with specific party internal nomination processes for the selection of these candidates.⁹⁵ The resulting individual lead candidates for the EPP and the PES were Manfred Weber, Chairman of the EPP group in the EP, and Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission, respectively. ALDE did not propose a single lead candidate but went with a 'team' of seven members, including Guy Verhofstadt, former Belgian Prime Minister and chair of the ALDE group in the European Parliament, and Margrethe Vestager, the European Commissioner for competition policy.

Whether or not the *Spitzenkandidaten* approach would work in 2019 as it did in 2014 depended on a number of variables, an important one being the agreement between the political families. The Secretary-General of the European Parliament, Klaus Welle, stated ahead of the elections that 'after the [2019] election results are out, parties will very quickly need to come back together to make decisions ... in 24 to 48 hours', otherwise delay could 'derail the process' and opponents of the process within the European Council would seize the opportunity.

4.3.2. The discussions in the European Council and between political parties

Ahead of the European Parliament elections

The *Spitzenkandidaten* process, and its success, surprised the members of the European Council in 2014. Informed observers argue that the objections of the EU Heads of State or Government were 'serious and numerous'⁹⁶ and they vowed to be more proactive the next time around. Published [interviews](#) with the Prime Minister of Latvia, Krišjānis Karins, and the former Prime Minister of Malta, Joseph Muscat, confirm that the vast majority of European Council leaders were against the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. Joseph Muscat indicated that 'most in [the European] Council are irritated with the idea that this is being changed to a situation where Parliament proposes, [European] Council rubber stamps and Parliament then has the final say'. Krišjānis Kariņš acknowledged he might be in the minority when it comes to wanting to give voters a say on who will become the Commission President, but that 'in [the European] Council, I am one of 28, soon I suppose 27'.

Already in its conclusions of 26-27 June 2014, the European Council [stated](#) that 'once the new European Commission is effectively in place, [it] will consider the process for the appointment of the President of the European Commission for the future, respecting the European Treaties'.

As early as February 2018, at their [informal meeting](#) 15 months before the European Parliament elections, the members of the European Council discussed whether the European Council should 'automatically accept the outcome of a *Spitzenkandidaten* process or should the European Council autonomously decide how to take account of the elections, having held appropriate consultations'. The results of the deliberations showed that the European Council 'cannot guarantee in advance that it will propose one of the lead candidates for President of the European Commission... [as] there is no automaticity in this process'.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission at the time, displayed the diverging views between the EU institutions. He stressed in his [State of the European Union speech](#) in September 2018 that he 'would like next year's elections to be a landmark for European democracy' and 'would like to see the *Spitzenkandidaten* process – that small step forward for European democracy – repeated'.

The next occasion where all the members of the European Council jointly discussed the selection process for the next EU institutional leadership was at the [Sibiu Summit](#) of 9 May 2019. At that meeting, President Tusk informed EU leaders about how he intended to proceed to reach agreement in a 'swift, smooth and effective way' on the new EU leadership. He emphasised that the rules set in the Treaties were to be followed for the appointments of the President of the European Council (Article 15(5) TEU), the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Article 18(1) TEU), and the President of the European Central Bank (Article 283(2) TFEU), and for the proposal of a candidate for the President of the European Commission (Article 17(7) TEU). President Tusk added that the nominations for the new EU leadership should reflect the EU's demography and geographical balance, but also gender and political balances. Finally, he stressed that these decisions were to be taken by consensus, if possible, but that he 'would not shy away from putting [them] to the vote' if needed.⁹⁷ To conclude the process in time for the June European Council meeting, he [called](#) a meeting of all 28 EU leaders on 28 May, immediately after the European Parliament elections.

These examples illustrate how the European Council as an institution prepared itself ahead of the European Parliament elections to be ready with a joint approach, at least on the procedure, if not on the candidate.

Outside the European Council meetings, its members started to organise themselves by party family. While in 2014 EU prime ministers belonging to different European political parties had held discussions on the nominations for the institutional cycle beginning in 2014, these rather informal discussions became much more structured for the nomination of the EU's institutional leadership in 2019. It was reported that the European Council members affiliated to ALDE agreed at an ALDE pre-summit that Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel could contact the PES-affiliated prime ministers to discuss their positions. The PES representatives also received an informal mandate from their PES peers to enter into these discussions.⁹⁸ Subsequently, liberal and social democrat prime ministers met in the margins of the Sibiu Summit.

After the EP elections

This increased consultation involving members of the European Council, organised by party political affiliation, became even more formalised following the elections to the European Parliament, held between 23 and 26 May 2019. The objectives of the [informal meeting](#) of EU-28 Heads of State or Government on 28 May 2019 were three-fold: to take stock of the election results; to discuss the principles and method for nominating high-level EU officials; and to start the nomination process. Following the meeting, President Tusk reported that the 'discussions confirmed the agreement reached by the leaders in February last year [2018], that the European Council will exercise its role when electing the Commission president, meaning – in accordance with the Treaties – that there can be no automaticity'. He also recalled the need for a balance in the positions, which reflects 'the diversity of the Union when it comes to geography, the size of countries, gender as well as political affiliation'. So, while confirming the 'package' approach, as well as political affiliation, as one of the criteria, President Tusk also [mentioned](#) that the 'ECB is not for party competition'.

[Beforehand](#) and in the margins of this European Council meeting, socialist and liberal Heads of State or Government [met](#) as representatives for their European political parties, stressing that the new institutional leadership should reflect the new majorities in the European Parliament, including social democrats and liberals.

At that same summit, President Tusk received the mandate from the European Council to carry out consultations among its members, including those affiliated to smaller political forces (e.g. ECR, with its Polish member in the European Council) and non-attached actors (e.g. the Italian Prime Minister). In parallel, six EU Heads of State or Government – the prime ministers of Croatia (Andrej Plenković, EPP), Latvia (Krišjānis Kariņš, EPP), the Netherlands (Mark Rutte, ALDE), Belgium (Charles Michel, ALDE), Spain (Pedro Sánchez, PES) and Portugal (Antonio Costa, PES) – were [nominated](#) as negotiators for their political families to discuss the high-level appointments informally. They were also to [represent](#) the views of the three main political families in the European Council in the discussions with President Tusk. Since the European Council did not (and still does not) include any Green EU Head of State or Government, the Green family was not included in this process. The negotiators [communicated](#) on social media about their meetings on [7 June](#) and [20 June](#).

[Observers](#) and participants commented that this organisation by political party family presented a 'new approach to negotiations within the European Council', and was 'a sign of the significance of political party positions within the European Council'.⁹⁹ It clearly showed that party affiliation was the structural element for the negotiations, which could theoretically also have been divided along geographical lines, but was not.

The European Council also [gave](#) Donald Tusk a mandate 'to engage in consultations with the European Parliament, as foreseen by the Treaty'. Indeed, Declaration 11 annexed to the Lisbon Treaty stipulates that 'the European Parliament and European Council are jointly responsible for the smooth running of the process leading to the election of the President of the European Commission. Prior to the decision of the European Council, representatives of the European Parliament and of the European Council will thus conduct the necessary consultations ...'.

This procedure was used for the first time in 2019, as back in 2014 the Parliament had rapidly declared its firm support for the EPP *Spitzenkandidat*, Jean-Claude Juncker, who was subsequently proposed by the European Council. This time, the Parliament had not declared its support for a common candidate, and a more formal consultation procedure was thus required. On 5 June, President Tusk and the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, held consultations on the high-level appointments ahead of the June European Council meeting. President Tusk also met individually with leaders of some of the main political groups, and on 18 June he met with the Parliament's Conference of Presidents, which is the main political decision-making body in the House and is made up of the leaders of all the political groups.

The discussions for the nominations of the EU's high-level appointments continued among EU Heads of State or Government at the European Council meeting of [20-21 June 2019](#); prior to the meeting, President Tusk had changed his view from 'cautiously optimistic to more cautious than optimistic'. Communication on social media showed that negotiations were very much based on European political party affiliation. The negotiators of the PES and ALDE [met](#) in the margins of the 20-21 June summit, first with, and later without, the EPP negotiators, but [with](#) Emmanuel Macron; the latter was not a negotiator himself, but was one of the most important EU Heads of State or Government from the European liberal political family.

Following the meeting, President Tusk concluded that, based on his 'consultations and statements made within the European Parliament, there was no majority on any candidate', with diverging views among EU leaders, notably German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, on the impact of this lack of a majority on the *Spitzenkandidaten* process itself. Considering this lack of agreement, another special European Council meeting was scheduled for 30 June.

Between the European Council of 20-21 June and the one starting on 30 June, many individual and multilateral meetings were held between [political party representatives](#), groups of Member States and between EU institutions. President Tusk, for instance, [held](#) individual meetings with the leaders

of several of the political groups in Parliament on 24 June. As part of the various discussions, a number of different leadership packages were considered.

Among the many discussions and speculations, one constellation, termed the 'Osaka deal', was considered more seriously; it originated from discussions between a group of senior EU prime ministers from all three main European political parties in the margins of the G20 summit, held on 28-29 June 2019 in Osaka, Japan.¹⁰⁰ This package would have included Frans Timmermans, one of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, as President of the European Commission. [Observers](#) and political party representatives [indicated](#) that the Osaka package fell through, among other reasons, due to objections from the EPP and some central and eastern European Member States.

The EPP had a clear position regarding the package of institutional leader positions: as the party having gained the most votes in the elections for the European Parliament, it considered that it was entitled to obtain the office of European Commission President. The Osaka deal, although including a *Spitzenkandidat* as European Commission President, did not fulfil this objective. This was made very clear by the majority of EPP leaders at the EPP pre-summit on 30 June 2019, which discussed the proposed leaders package in great detail.¹⁰¹ This example shows how internal European political party decisions have the power to overturn preliminary deals between a group of EU Heads of State or Government.

Later on 30 June 2019, the European Council convened for a special meeting with the aim of agreeing on the leadership package. This European Council meeting lasted from [30 June to 2 July](#), the second longest in EU history after the European Council in Nice of 7-10 December 2000. The meeting was interrupted on several occasions; during some of these interruptions, EU Heads of State or Government gathered according to their European party family affiliation to deliberate, but they also met [representatives of different political families](#) to consider the various options on the table. Section 3.1 above, on pre-summits, shows that the PES held two formal pre-summit meetings, one just ahead of (30 June) and one (2 July) during the European Council meeting.

Stopping a European Council meeting for deliberations within political families is a new phenomenon; it had not happened in this form in the past, and clearly indicates the increased politicisation of the European Council.¹⁰²

In the end, the European Council [agreed](#) on a package of candidates for the high-level EU positions:

- Ursula von der Leyen (EPP, Germany) for European Commission President;
- Charles Michel (ALDE, Belgium) for European Council President;
- Josep Borrell (PES, Spain) for High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy;
- Christine Lagarde (Independent, France) for President of the European Central Bank.

The final result agreed by the EU Heads of State or Government [showed](#) a clear division of the posts between the European political parties, confirming the politicisation of the European Council and the important role of European political parties.

Conclusion

This study began with the question of if and how European political parties have adapted their activities to the increased role of the European Council. The research makes it apparent that European political parties should not just be equated with national political parties operating at the European level. They have been designed for a multi-level form of governance and function in a way which is appropriate to a more multinational and multicultural environment, and they need to be examined accordingly.

The role of political parties at European level, and notably regarding the European Council, has developed in phases over time. Key moments for the strengthening of their role and capacity to influence were, to a similar degree for all political parties, the establishment of an EU legal status, the provision of official EU funding, and later the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process for selecting the European Commission President.

The study has demonstrated that European political parties play an important coordination role within the EU political system. While the level of coordination varies between the different European political parties, all of them have coordination as their main *raison d'être* and their respective activities for that purpose have increased over time, notably regarding the preparation of European Council meetings among the EU Heads of State or Government affiliated to their political family. Coordination activities can be classified conceptually under 'vertical', 'horizontal' and 'diagonal' coordination: the first represents the bridge between the national and European level; the second is the harmonisation between the EU institutions; and the third concerns the interactions across Member States. The analysis has shown that all these forms of coordination indicate that European political parties are both 'arenas' and 'actors' in relation to the functioning of the EU.

The numerical strength of the three main political parties has fluctuated over time, with each party having had high and low points. Since the 2000s, however, it would neither be possible nor accurate to determine periods where one or the other European party would have 'dominated' the European Council; the post-2004 period should rather be considered as the end of single-party dominance in the European Council and an era of increased party diversity.

The analysis highlights the need not only to consider the balance of the European political families within the European Council itself, but also to take account of the different political make-up of the governments in the Member States. European political families can also influence European Council proceedings through other channels, as their national affiliates are often in national coalition governments, albeit without providing the prime minister. This increases the importance of the coordination within and between European political parties, and across Member States.

At different moments in time, the three main political parties (the EPP, the PES and ALDE) relaunched and formalised their activities with respect to the European Council. The expanded scope of their coordination activities was often the result of a vision by strong personalities in their political family and/or due to the changing political balance in the European Council.

European political parties' main coordination activities in the context of the European Council are clearly their respective pre-summits just ahead of European Council meetings. These pre-summits serve multiple purposes – including coordinating positions for the imminent European Council discussions, long-term strategising, communication, socialising and networking – with the importance of each varying between the different parties. As European political parties have different philosophies regarding the number and type of participants, ranging from a rather exclusive format to a more inclusive approach, the main purpose also varies between the different types of participant (for example, a head of government, an opposition leader, or a national leader from a non-Member State).

The evidence shows a clear increase in pre-summit meetings across the different political families in recent years, which is linked not only to the increase in the number of European Council meetings, but also to the increased attention EU leaders in the European Council pay to these events and the benefit they see in them. The decision to hold a pre-summit is often linked to the nature of the specific meeting of the European Council (i.e. whether it is formal or informal), with fewer pre-summits being organised for informal meetings.

The research shows that the number of pre-summits, as well as the participants therein, was substantially impacted by restrictions set on physical meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the need to hold pre-summits virtually had the potential to increase the overall number of participants; on the other hand, the participation of many of the highest-level participants was reduced, as political leaders are not too fond of virtual meetings, which have neither the exclusivity and 'privacy' nor the media echo of physical meetings.

To provide additional evidence for the European political families' communication activities regarding the European Council, this study carried out an analysis of the Twitter activity of European political parties and groups in the EP. This analysis shows that all political families use Twitter, but it identifies some variety between, and within, political parties and political groups, concerning the scope, number and regularity of their tweets about the European Council.

If one considers the substantial efforts that political parties put into coordinating their respective European Council members, notably by organising pre-summits, as well as ensuring horizontal coordination between the different EU institutions, one must conclude that the regular coordination in the European party political meetings has a clear purpose and leads to real benefits in the European Council. If these coordination meetings were inefficient, they would probably stop holding them. However, clearly identifying and proving the impact of the actions of a specific political actor, such as a political party, on European Council conclusions and decisions can be challenging.

To test the hypothesis that European political parties have strengthened their focus on the European Council, and that their coordination can, in certain cases, have direct consequences on the decisions of the European Council, the study examined the case study of the nomination of the new institutional leadership in 2019. The comparison with the nominations of the EU's institutional leadership in 2009 and 2014 showed the changing balance between political parties in the European Parliament and the European Council and the consequences on the allocation of high-level positions per political family. It also indicated that the dates of their respective selections by the European Council became increasingly close, occurring on the same day in July 2019, indicating more structured coordination within and between European political parties.

The influence of European political parties not only depends on their numerical strength in the European Council, but also on the internal cohesiveness of a political family (i.e. how similar the political positions are between the various national affiliates). If they cannot develop a joint position, due to conflicting internal views, their influence in the discussions with other European political parties and on the decisions of the EU institutions will be limited. However, if they reach a coordinated position, it is more likely that this convergence of views can result in real impact.

The case study revealed and confirmed numerous facts concerning European political parties and the European Council. Firstly, European political parties and their pre-summits can have an impact on decisions of the European Council, as has been the case notably with the nomination of the EU's institutional leadership. Previous research has shown that this influence is more limited on policy issues, particularly if they are not clearly split on a left-right spectrum. Secondly, the European Union and the European Council have become more politicised, also due to the European political parties and the *Spitzenkandidaten* process.

The use of new structural elements for selecting the EU institutional leadership in 2019 has highlighted the developing party politicisation of the European Council. The nomination of six EU Heads of State or Government as negotiators for the three main political families in the high-level appointment process, and the interruption of a decisive European Council meeting to allow EU leaders to deliberate on the proposals within their own European political families, are two examples of this development.

The growing politicisation of the EU, and notably of the European Council, and the increased coordination role of the European political parties in the context of the European Council, need to be seen as two complementary trends which reinforce one another. The politicisation of the European Council leads to increased attention being paid to this body by European political parties, which in turn further reinforces the politicisation of the European Council. Moreover, the fact that European political parties are strengthening their coordination activities, based on growing demand by their affiliates who are members of the European Council, supports this claim.

The study clearly shows that European political parties, whose impact has long been underestimated, contribute significantly to the functioning of the European Union, and argues that they should be recognised for what they really do for the European system, namely oiling the wheels of the EU institutional machinery, not least through facilitating coordination across institutional barriers.

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- 28 Individual membership is not calculated in order to be comparable with the data of other studies used below.
- 29 If one included the other 19 MEPs from the S&D group who have an individually direct association with the PES and not via national parties, the PES would have a 97 % overlap with the S&D group. Similarly, adding the 7 additional MEPs who have a direct and individual membership of the Green party, the overlap between the Green party and the green political group would be 78 %. Adding 4 MEPs who have a direct and individual membership of the ECR party, the overlap between party and political group would be 84 %. Three additional MEPs with a direct and individual membership of the ID party would increase the overlap between party and political group to 84 %. In the case of the Left group, 12 additional MEPs have a direct and individual membership of the Party of the European Left, not via the national parties, which would increase the overlap to 74 %.
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- 50 Renew Europe took over as the formal host for the pre-summits of the European liberal political family in October 2019. See https://www.aldeparty.eu/first_renew_europe_pre_summit_held_in_brussels.
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- 62 Interviews with the author.
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- 64 [26 March 2020](#) (30); [20 February 2020](#) (22); [12 December 2019](#) (18); [17 October 2019](#) (28); [20 June 2019](#) (26); [21 March 2019](#) (17).
- 65 [17 December 2015](#) (14); [20 October 2016](#) (15); [December 2018](#) (13); [28 May 2019](#) (16); [17 October 2019](#) (14); [June 2021](#) (17).
- 66 Sometimes some parties also hold meetings which they label pre-summits at moments where no European Council meeting is taken place, such as in the margins of their party congresses.
- 67 Van Hecke, S. and Johansson K., 2013.
- 68 This period was chosen as Renew Europe took over the hosting of the pre-summits from ALDE from October 2019 onwards.
- 69 ALDE also held a Leaders meeting on that occasion, but not in an exclusive pre-summit format and with a wider agenda that went beyond the European Council.

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The role of the European political parties, often underestimated in the past, has increased significantly over the years. Today, they are important coordinators within the EU political system, carrying out a variety of activities that can be classified conceptually as 'vertical', 'horizontal' and 'diagonal' coordination.

This EPRS study explores the growing 'politicisation' of the European Council and the increased coordination role which European political parties appear to play in the context of the European Council.

The parties' main coordination activities are clearly their respective 'pre-summits', held just ahead of European Council meetings. These pre-summits serve multiple purposes for the parties – including coordinating positions for the imminent European Council discussions, long-term strategising, communication, socialising and networking – with the importance of each varying between the different parties.

A case study looking at the nomination of the EU's new institutional leadership in 2019 illustrates the importance of the European political parties' role in coordinating between EU leaders in the European Council.

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