

The European Parliament at 70: Origins and long-term trajectories

When Jean Monnet first devised what became known as the Schuman Plan, named after French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, it did not even include a parliamentary assembly. When the Common Assembly was subsequently created for the European Coal and Steel Community, it consisted of delegates from national parliaments who had only limited and ineffective supervisory powers. Despite its humble origins, however, the delegates succeeded in establishing long-term trajectories that were crucial for the Common Assembly's evolution into the present-day European Parliament, which now forms the cornerstone of the European Union as a transnational European democracy.

Background

Seventy years after its creation, in the form of the Common Assembly (CA) of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952, the European Parliament (EP) has become a powerful institution in the EU. Directly elected since 1979, it expresses the will of European citizens and undergirds the EU's democratic legitimacy. It shares co-decision rights with the Council through the ordinary legislative procedure introduced in this form in the Lisbon Treaty. It also enjoys veto powers over international and accession treaties through the consent procedure. Although some social scientists have identified a new inter-governmental practice of crisis management in the EU, the EP continues to push the EU to act robustly on domestic and foreign policy issues, and not based on the lowest common denominator. Its prominent role in the EU's active support for Ukraine is a recent case in point.

It is surprising, then, that the EP was nearly not present at the creation of what is now the EU. When Jean Monnet first formulated his plan for European integration in the coal and steel sector with various supranational institutional features, he included no parliamentary assembly - despite the fact that even the loosely organised Council of Europe had its Consultative Assembly of delegates from national parliaments. Crucially, Monnet, who became the first President of the ECSC's High Authority – the forerunner of the European Commission – from 1952 to 1954, had a strongly technocratic internationalist vision for European integration. His thinking was primarily guided by the idea that to overcome frictions among national governments it was necessary to create a supranational executive body with strong legal and policy-making powers, and that this body would act in what Monnet called 'the European interest'. However, not only ardent federalists, but large majorities in the pro-integration political parties in the six ECSC founding Member States – France, Italy, West Germany, and the Benelux countries – lobbied strongly for the creation of a parliamentary dimension. As a result, the CA was incorporated in the ECSC Treaty. It consisted of 78 delegates from the national parliaments. In 1958, when the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom were formed, it became the single parliamentary institution for all three Communities, while the merger of their other institutions was delayed until 1967. The Assembly called itself the European Parliament from 1962, and was directly elected for the first time in 1979.



Paul-Henri Spaak addresses the Common Assembly's first session, September 1952.

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Long-term trajectories

The EP has sometimes been tempted to narrate its own history as if it only really started with its first direct election in 1979, which gave it direct legitimacy for the first time. But this overlooks how several long-term trajectories established by the CA/EP between 1952 and 1979 have shaped the EP in decisive ways up to the present day. One of these trajectories goes back to the formation of transnational ideological, rather than national groups. Practised from the CA's first sitting in September 1952, this transnational cooperation in groups was formalised in the CA's Rules of Procedure in June 1953, which required a minimum of nine members for the setting-up of a group. The delegates formed three such groups, the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, and the Liberals, with the latter including several delegates from other smaller national parties. Communists from Italy and France were initially excluded from representation in the CA/EP by the pro-integration majorities in their national parliaments.

The formation of these groups did not immediately result in politicised transnational decision-making. Thus, when the Belgian Socialist Paul-Henri Spaak was elected the CA's first president, he also received the votes of all non-socialist delegates from Belgium, France, and Luxembourg, beating the German Christian Democrat Heinrich von Brentano by 38 votes to 30. Working together in transnational groups over time created the institutional and cultural conditions for greater politicisation across transnational, rather than national lines, however, when the EP was directly elected in 1979 and acquired legislative powers in the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty.

A second important trajectory concerned the CA's strong activism from the start in pushing for the broader agenda of institutional deepening and for more powers for itself in particular. The CA was largely self-selecting. The vast majority of its members supported European integration. They were more or less able to and interested in, operating in a transnational parliament and they volunteered to travel to Luxembourg and later, Strasbourg and Brussels. Many had links with the federalist movement as well. Reconstituted as the Ad Hoc Assembly, with some additional members, the CA drafted and then passed the European Political Community (EPC) treaty in March 1953, following the insertion of Article 38 in the European Defence Community Treaty. Although it was never ratified, the EPC created a strong path-dependency, through the 1984 Draft Treaty on European Union and the contemporary experience of the 2021-2022 Conference on the Future of Europe, for the EP's advocacy of the Community's constitutionalisation. At the same time, the delegates worked, with some success, towards a number of interinstitutional agreements to strengthen the EP's role in the Community, and they secured budgetary powers even before the 1979 direct elections, in the 1970 Luxembourg and 1975 Brussels Treaties.

Defining clear conditions for Community membership constituted a third important trajectory of the CA's activism which carried over into the elected EP. When Franco's Spain appeared to be on the verge of applying for EEC membership in the early 1960s, the EP passed the Birkelbach Report in 1962, named after the German Social Democrat Willi Birkelbach. It laid down core conditions, such as a country having a democratic constitution, which were later formalised in the 1993 Copenhagen criteria before being incorporated into the Lisbon Treaty. Linked to the membership issue, the EP also became very active in protecting human rights elsewhere, as in the case of the Colonels' Regime in Greece in the years 1967 to 1974, and in the transition to democracy in Spain and Portugal in the mid-1970s – a form of external policy activism that the elected EP developed further when it created the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, awarded for the first time in 1988 to Nelson Mandela and Anatoli Marchenko.

Although only indirectly legitimised, therefore, the CA as a part-time parliament consisting of national MPs nevertheless established strong long-term trajectories that have shaped the elected EP, its internal constitution and politics, its constitutional activism, and even to some extent, its policy preferences, up to the present day. Historical insights in this way help us better understand the EP's internal dynamics as well as its role in the EU as a political system.

The European Parliament History Service plans to publish more in-depth EPRS papers in 2023, looking at the CA/EP's role in the process of constitutionalisation and at the creation and operation of its transnational groups in a historical perspective.