HEARING

The Perspectives for the Development of Political Parties at European Level

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Europarties and the making of a demos

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The setting

The EU is a fairly enough established collectivity and, more accurately, a ‘polities’ polity’. Although it continues to defy any authoritative definition, it has come closer to a ‘sympolity’ (Tsatsos, 2009) of historically constituted units, or to an ‘organized synarchy’ (Chryssochoou, 2009) of co-determined sovereignties. The EU may not have evolved into a democracy in its own right, but it projects a profound locking together of democratic polities regarding the joint exercise of powers. What follows links the debate on European political party development with the activation of public interest in EU affairs. By transcending the centrality of the oft-raised questions ‘who governs and how’, it calls attention to the question ‘who is governed’. Designing a reform package for Europarties as a means of mobilizing the democratic energies of individual and organized citizens is no easy task, not least due to the EU’s systemic complexity. But this may be turned into an advantage, should one clarifies the ‘constitutive mission’ of Europarties, and how an informed and principled dialogue on their political development can facilitate the emergence of a plural demos, whose members can direct their democratic claims to, and via, the central institutions.

The debate

Underlying discourses on European party regulation is a deeper concern of how to co-constitute a transnational civic space composed of free and equal citizens, and what a collective founding, in the form of a ‘civic contract’ among diverse peoples, might entail for the future of integration. But why focus on transnational party federations, whose organizational structure, internal cohesion, budgetary resources, financial independence, legal standing, and electoral performance remain weak and, as often reported, politically underdeveloped? Why should a discussion of EU democracy-enhancing focus on loose party structures characterized by a continuously declining turnout and discouraging levels of citizen identification with their internal working arrangements, policy platforms, institutional strategies, and normative commitments?

A plausible answer was offered by Schattschneider, (1942:1), who famously wrote: ‘The political parties created modern democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties’. Political parties, be they authoritative, congruent, well-founded, or legally regulated, are ‘an integral expression of the individuals’ right to freely form associations’ (Venice Commission, 2010:6), as well as ‘the most widely utilized means for political participation and exercise of related
rights’ (Ibid:8). A political party can be defined as ‘a free association of persons, one of the aims of which is to express the political will of citizens including through participation in the management of public affairs and the presentation of candidates to free and democratic elections’ (Ibid:12). In general, political parties contribute to democratic will-formation, construct collective political identifications, give access and voice to citizens, encourage public debate, respond to social demands, and bestow citizens with a sense of ‘demos-hood’. Hence a corresponding function of Europarties is to offer a sense of democratic direction based on a clear view of European demos, as well as on how to make it or keep it together. This way, they can intensify their role in building a European civic identity, and reassign meaning to the Maastricht provision regarding their potential ‘to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union’. This accords with a view of political parties as ‘conveyer belts’ or ‘preformators’ of the citizens’ will (Giannakou, 2010:5), and with Lisbon’s aspirations for a European ‘political space’.

The point is that one should not refer to a single or undifferentiated notion of EU demos, inspired by ethnocultural expressions of unity, or based on a melting-pot type of society, where pre-existing identities are assimilated into an overarching one, but rather should aim at the horizontal interaction of citizens as active members in a larger polity. Underlying this view is Pettit’s (1997:200) notion of ‘a democracy of ideas’: ‘a democracy that follows deliberative patterns of decision-making, that includes all the major voices of difference within the community, and that responds appropriately to the contestations raised against it’. In other words, a discursive polity composed of real people which gives voice to real democratic concerns in real-life situations. As the EU should not be detached from its constituent identities, the making of a European demos refers to a discursive civic space, where politically connected citizens are free to develop common democratic ‘grounds’. Strengthening Europarties is a means of enhancing participatory governance in the EU, ascribing to a currently fragmented electorate a sense of plural ‘demos-hood’ in turn based on the notion ‘many peoples, one demos’.

The statute
Keeping in mind that ‘political parties have rights and responsibilities regardless of their legal status’ (Venice Commission, 2010:12), granting Europarties (and their political foundations) an authentic legal status and a legal personality of their own –
drawn directly from EU law—, rather than being dependent on the differing laws of their national affiliates, offers them the opportunity to act as representative agents of the European public interest. Such a statute would not only improve the regulatory setting within which Europarties pursue their tasks, nor would it merely allow them to institute a minimum set of legal standards (however important these may be for their functional autonomy), but it would also provide them with a platform from which to strengthen their electoral and daily bonds with a citizenry that feels dissociated from EU processes. Europarties can then introduce innovative means of connecting to the European publics and their respective public spheres. The idea of transnational party lists is a good case in point, as it would encourage cross-country synergies among candidates standing for genuinely European issues and policy platforms, rather than competing for the public vote in a fragmented, low-profile, undervalued, and second-rate electoral campaign fought on issues which are reflective of domestic agendas.

In line with the above is the idea of Europarties being authorized to participate in referenda campaigns on EU-related issues. This is reflective of a consensus view shared in principle by Europarties, and poses a series of challenges to their collective political and discursive capacity to articulate their views directly to the citizen, and even be allowed to steer or shape the debate on Europe within a member polity. To argue that such a prospect constitutes an unacceptable direct form of interference to the domestic public spheres is to miss the point that the referenda concerned would be directly linked to an EU policy, and that domestic and EU affairs are intertwined to such an extent that it is hardly possible to discern the ‘spatial’ origins, motives, and rationale of a European act, or its potential effects in the domestic political arena. It all comes down to a political question: whether or not Europarties should be given the right to influence national public opinion, by which means, and to what extent. But if they express the political will of EU citizens, as the Maastricht provision stipulates, it seems logical to be allowed to participate in a referendum campaign, provided though that the issue at hand maintains a direct link with EU politics (Giannakou, 2010:7).

Regulating the Europarties is part of a wider evolution of political party law in the member polities (especially on electoral campaign and party funding), but also in other international settings such as the Council of Europe (Molenaar, 2010). This is yet another indication that the EU can be taken as ‘a polity like any other’ (Hix, 1994), and that the debate on EU party regulation relates to different conceptions of ‘eurodemocracy’, ranging from a postnational view of ‘demos-cracy’ to more
in instrumental or statecentric accounts of ‘dемoi-cracy’ (Nikolaidis, 2004). As Molennar (2010:4) argues, ‘one should keep in mind that party regulation is always a means to support a higher normative goal’. Likewise, different conceptions of the EU account for different strategies for party regulation. From a ‘демос-cracy’ perspective, an EU party statute which can lead to a legal status/personality for Europarties claims that the latter should act as real agents of EU political will-formation. On the other hand, an EU ‘демо-cracy’ envisages a minimalist or functionalist role for Europarties as an extension of national party structures and forms of political contestation. Although in-between lies a variety of takes on the meaning of ‘eurodemocracy’ and how to tackle the EU’s multiple (and multiplying) democratic deficits, a European party statute has a role to play in dealing with the low levels of civicism shared amongst Europeans. As the argument goes, the more the EU relies on democratic credentials –its party system qualifying as one– the greater its efforts should be to encourage participation.

The benefits

The preceding analysis linked European party development and regulation with a vision of democratic politics which promotes certain public goods, whose relevance extends beyond narrowly defined electoral concerns or collective party co-ordination. Early as may be to speculate on a possible end state of EU party reforms, the views expressed here offer a blueprint for a civic-oriented reform strategy which entails the promise of more encompassing democratic transformations. In that sense, a European civic space offers a plausible answer to Europe’s concerns with heterogeneity, which may serve as a condition for uniting –not unifying– diverse publics into a ‘Republic of Europeans’ (Lavdas and Chryssochou, 2007), driven by the inclusionary virtues of caritas rei publicae, and responding to the question whether Europe can be seen as ‘a community united in a common argument about the meaning, extent and scope of liberty’ (Ignatieff, 2000:265). But for the EU to be driven by an engaging demos, it is important to recognize the potential of Europarties as system-steering agencies which can induce integrative sentiments, build on existing transnational political rights, take European party politics beyond a symbolic level, structure political contestation at EU level though a party system (Hix, 2002:50), make the European Parliament as a whole more responsive to its electorate, and assist in the making of a transnational demos. This way the EU would be better equipped to allocate authoritatively, rather than
derivatively, rights and values within its emergent civic society and to offer a sense of direction which can inspire diverse citizens to share a sense of plural demos-hood.

References