



## EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

# The Role of Europarties in Ukraine: the invisible EU membership facilitator?

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### Summary

This analysis focuses on the cooperation between the European party federations – or ‘Europarties’ – and domestic political parties in Ukraine. Its aim is to assess the main opportunities and challenges when it comes to Europarties’ potential role in Ukraine’s democratic development and its EU-membership aspirations.

It first presents the Europarties and summarizes their role in the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007. It then examines the political landscape in Ukraine and the challenges for the Europarties in finding partners in a context of unstable and ‘non-ideological’ political parties. It goes on to consider the incentives for transnational party cooperation among both Europarties and the Ukrainian parties, which are of both instrumental and ideational character.

Against this background, it presents an analysis of how cooperation between Europarties and Ukrainian parties has played out thus far. It concludes that the Europarties have so far not had any significant effects on the characteristics of Ukraine’s party system. This can be explained by the competition among Europarties, which has led to a softening of membership criteria. However, the analysis shows that the cooperation is nevertheless significant: the Europarties have found an important role in supporting Ukraine’s EU-integration process. With their long experience and wide network among high-level contacts within the EU, the Europarties can help Ukraine in making the necessary reforms and act as ambassadors for Ukraine’s EU-membership aspirations.

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The opinions expressed in this analysis are those of the author.

## 1. Introduction

Ukraine's relations with the European Union have long been important: the aspirations to forge a closer relationship with the EU was a central theme in the 'Orange revolution', in 2004–05, and above all in the Maidan revolution of 2013–14. Indeed, Ukraine's path towards full sovereignty and democracy is widely understood as intimately linked to its objective of becoming a part of the European family and embracing the reform process that is required for full EU-membership (Nilsson & Silander 2015, 203). And these relations have become increasingly pertinent since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and especially after its full-scale invasion in 2022. The strengthening of ties with the EU (in combination with Ukraine's NATO-membership aspirations) has even been used, by some, to attempt to justify Russia's brutal and illegal invasion.

This analysis deals with one specific aspect of EU-Ukraine relations: the cooperation between European party federations (commonly referred to as Europarties) and domestic political parties in Ukraine. Contacts and interactions at this level have so far been largely ignored in both the media and academic research, despite the potential role they could play in Ukraine's democratic development as well as in its path to future EU-membership. As an example, the socialisation effects of cooperation in less formal settings may be a significant contribution supporting parallel technical reforms. Moreover, by offering certain 'carrots' such as international recognition and legitimacy, Europarties can potentially influence their non-EU partner parties to become more similar to their sister parties in the EU. This influence may concern ideology, organisation, and party system structure but it also relates to broader norms that concern, for example, democracy and human rights.

Previous studies indicate that Europarties' influence on the new political parties in the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement had a 'standardising' effect on the party systems in the applicant countries.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the integration of the new EU member states in 2004 and 2007 went relatively smoothly, partly thanks to years of 'learning process' among the political parties from the then candidate states. Through a combination of Europarty membership criteria and various activities such as courses, seminars, internships and conferences the applicant parties were gradually integrated into their respective party family ahead of their country's accession. In many ways, the current political challenges in Ukraine resemble those of the EU candidate countries in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s: corruption, populism, and weak and unstable political party organisations. At the same time, Ukraine is a case of its own with its historical links to Russia, a stronger Soviet legacy, a semi-presidential system with a powerful role for the president and, naturally, the ongoing full-scale war since February 2022. Furthermore, peace and democracy on the broader continent is at stake and the EU has proved willing to go far to support Ukraine. This is also the case with the Europarties, which are eager to support their Ukrainian partner parties. The liberal ALDE has even begun to accept parties from non-EU countries including Ukraine as full members to underline its support for these parties' struggle for a democratic future within the EU.

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More specifically, the aim of this analysis is to *assess the main opportunities and challenges for the Europarties to play a role in Ukraine's democratic development as well as its EU-membership aspirations.* The analysis is built on a qualitative assessment of the process of Europarty engagement in Ukraine through a scrutiny of previous research, complemented with interviews with representatives

<sup>1</sup> The term *standardization* refers to a process of adaptation among the political parties in non-EU countries, which seek affiliation with their respective European party family. When inspiration is drawn from foreign 'model parties', a political party can be expected to become more similar to its West European sister parties. Consequently, the process tends to reinforce increasing uniformity. See Dakowska 2002, Johansson 2008, and Öhlén 2013.

of the Europarties and politicians in Ukraine. To that end, the paper draws on the theoretical framework by von dem Berge and Poguntke (2013) on Europarty influence on political parties in Central and Eastern Europe, which is based on the previous experience of the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement processes.

The analysis is structured as follows. After this introduction, the second section presents the Europarties and their role in the EU-system. The third section presents an overview of the party landscape in Ukraine and its main characteristics. The fourth section addresses the incentives among the Europarties and non-EU parties that trigger cooperation between them. The fifth section provides an overview of the phases of cooperation and assesses the challenges of the Europarties as well as their potential role for Ukraine's party development and Ukraine's possible EU membership. The sixth section concludes by discussing the key findings of the paper.

## 2. The European party federations – the 'Europarties' – and their role in the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007

In the EU, national political parties are organised in transnational party federations, commonly referred to as Europarties. They operate in two different arenas as they exist both within the European Parliament as 'political groups' and outside of the parliamentary assembly. For many years, political parties in the EU only existed as groups within the European Parliament.<sup>2</sup> However, in the 1970s, the development of extra-parliamentary transnational party organisations began when the most influential party families (the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and the Liberals) coordinated their electoral campaigns ahead of the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979. Since then, the Europarties have slowly consolidated into coherent and professional organisations. In 1993, they were formally recognized in the EU Treaties,<sup>3</sup> and since 2004 they have received funding from the EU budget. With the Lisbon treaty in 2009 they were

granted legal status and a stronger formal role (Leinen 2022, 13–14; Johansson & Raunio 2022, 177).

The initial ambition behind the formation of the Europarties was to reduce the EU's democratic deficit by establishing a common, Europe-wide link between EU citizens and EU-institutions. However, due to strong resistance from national parties, these ambitions have not been realized. The Europarties remain weak in terms of traditional party functions such as representation, aggregation and articulation of voters' opinions and interests (Raunio 2022, 131–32). Nevertheless, they do perform certain functions as 'network facilitators'. Through regular party congresses and party leaders' meetings, the Europarties generate and coordinate common positions prior to meetings of the Council of the EU and parliamentary sessions, and above all before the European parliamentary elections. Perhaps the most important function of the Europarties is their contribution to processes of learning and socialisation among their member parties. By organising formal meetings as well as informal gatherings such as courses, seminars, and conferences they build trust and foster a sense of community among the member parties (Chrysogelos 2017, 259).

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As of May 2023 there are ten registered Europarties (Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations, n.d.). All have basically the same organizational structure based on three elements: 1. national member parties, 2. EP party groups and 3. extra-parliamentary organisations. In a process of gradual professionalisation, the Europarties have managed to develop their internal extra-parliamentary organisation with party congresses. However,

<sup>2</sup> Although the EU came into being with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, for brevity I use the term to describe that organisation and its predecessors, the European Community and the European Economic Community.

<sup>3</sup> In Article 137 of the Treaty on European Union (1993)

**Table 1** Overview of Europarties and party groups in the European Parliament

European political party	Europarty abbreviation	Europarty founded	Group in the European Parliament
European People's Party	EPP	1976	European People's Party (EPP)
Party of European Socialists	PES	1973	Socialists & Democrats (S&D)
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe	ALDE	1976	Renew
European Conservatives and Reformists Party	ECR Party	2009	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)
Identity and Democracy Party	ID Party	2014	Identity and Democracy (ID)
European Green Party	EGP	2004	Greens-European Free Alliance
Party of the European Left	PEL	2004	European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL)
European Democratic Party	EDP	2004	Renew
European Free Alliance	EFA	1981	Greens-European Free Alliance
European Christian Political Movement	ECPM	2002	Both in EPP and ECR

three Europarties stand out as the most developed and influential party organisations: the Christian democratic EPP, the social democratic PES and the liberal ALDE. As well as regular party congresses, these three Europarties also have a presidency that meets regularly and a party secretariat based in Brussels (Jansen 2006, 48–49).

When it comes to the EU enlargement processes of 2004 and 2007, the Europarties played an important role in assisting the political parties in the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. The power vacuum in these states after the collapse of communism presented a great opportunity for the EU to step forward and offer leadership, assistance and, eventually, future EU-membership. Yet at the same time the political situation was unstable and fragile as the economy deteriorated in several countries in the early 1990s. This, in combination with a relative lack of historical experience of democracy resulted in different degrees of political instability, corruption, and nationalist/populist rhetoric.

The three most influential Europarties (the EPP, the PES and ALDE) grasped the opportunity; all were active throughout the 1990s in identifying partner parties and establishing a network across the whole region. There were significant challenges in identifying appropriate partners as

the ideological landscape was fluid and the new party systems immature. Moreover, the pre-communist historical experience was also different in Central and Eastern Europe where national sovereignty and issues with ethnic minorities have played a stronger role. Nevertheless, over time the Europarties managed to build stable links with sister parties in most countries in the region. In fact, the three Europarties managed to influence the new parties and ‘integrate’ them into their respective party families through a combination of membership criteria (the applicant parties were offered observer status), practical assistance and several other activities such as courses in party building and electoral campaigning, summer schools, internships, and conferences. As mentioned above, this had a standardising effect on the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe as the political parties in the new democracies had an interest in becoming more similar to certain Western European ‘role model sister parties’ within their party family. This provided both internal and external legitimacy, and the Europarty affiliation also provided access to a broad network of influential politicians (Dakowska 2002; Öhlén 2013; von der Berge 2017).

Consequently, the Europarties learned that with patience and a strong organisation they really could make a difference and help inexperienced

parties from young democracies to develop into stable, mature parties able to function in a fully-fledged democracy. But the Europarties learnt an additional lesson: the process of finding partners in new territories was also about competition of future power aspirations in the EU institutions. The larger the number and size of the parties that became affiliated with the Europarty, the bigger and more influential the Europarty would be after the EU enlargement, when the new member state would have representatives in the EU institutions. Yet this demanded a certain ‘openness’ from the Europarty to accept partner parties which were a doubtful ideological match. A third lesson from this period was that the social democratic party family had a difficult time finding partners in the new democracies as ‘socialism’ carried negative connotations after the communist era. Consequently, the Christian Democratic EPP, which had been most pragmatic in terms of ideological coherence and instead prioritised size, became the biggest and most influential Europarty after the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements. As we shall see, all three lessons would later have consequences for the Europarties’ actions and strategies in Ukraine.

### 3. The party landscape in Ukraine and the prospects for cooperation with Europarties

Ukraine is still a young democracy, and its party system is fluid and in a process of gradual institutionalisation. As in many post-communist countries, the parties are rather elite-based, lack anchorage in civil society, and experience low party membership. Moreover, electoral volatility is high, party organization is weak, party splits are common, and coalition-behaviour is fluid. However, Ukraine is also specifically a post-*Soviet* country, which involves certain historical legacies.<sup>4</sup> Although it has a pluralistic civil society with pro-democratic values, there is a lingering heritage of entrenched clientelist networks and widespread corruption (Haider 2020, 4–5). This historical heritage combined with the tendency of a strong focus on the ‘leader’ (in a semi-presidential setting where the president has a strong power base)

also affects the political parties and has led to weak party organisations built on clientelist and charismatic mechanisms, primarily focused on winning elections. They are typically heavily reliant on state resources and secure the loyalty of political and economic elites through patronage and economic rewards (Kitschelt 1999, 23; Mair 1997, 180ff; Lewis 2011, 2–3; Terzyan 2020, 187).

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When the three most influential Europarties – the European People’s Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance for Democracy for Europe (ALDE) – started looking for potential partners in Ukraine, it was not self-evident which parties they could establish cooperation with. The weak party organisations, combined with a lack of patience among the electorate, has led to a party landscape that is constantly changing. As illustrated in table 2, parties come and go, parties split and merge with others and, above all, parties are not in majority coalitions for very long periods. But one stable feature over-time has been a division between one ‘national’, pro-EU camp and one ‘pro-Russian’, left-wing and EU-sceptic camp. This illustrates the tendency among Ukrainian parties of having rather indistinct ideological profiles, and indeed containing different political groups with divergent ideological outlooks (Bader 2010, 82). Instead, geostrategic and civilisational orientations are the main structuring aspects, rather than economic and socio-political issues (Umland 2011). In 2011, a new electoral law banned the participation of party-blocs, and the threshold was increased to five per cent in parliamentary elections. This led to a series of mergers between different political parties. Consequently, the pre-existing trend of gathering different political groups under broad ‘umbrella parties’ was accentuated. Another important transformation was triggered by Russia’s annexation

<sup>4</sup> It should be underlined that there is some variation among the post-Soviet countries, where especially the Baltic countries have been more integrated into Western Europe with EU and NATO membership.

**Table 2** The political parties in Ukraine 2012-2019

Political party	Founded	Ideology	Parliamentary elections results		
			2012	2014	2019
Servant of the People	2019	Liberalism, populism	-	-	43,2%
European Solidarity	2000	Liberal conservatism, Christian democracy	-	21,8%	8,1%
Fatherland	1999	Conservatism, populism	25,5%	5,7%	8,2%
Voice	2019	Liberalism	-	-	5,8%
Opposition platform – For life*	1999	Pro-Russia, EU-sceptic	-	-	13,1%
Opposition bloc*	2014	Pro-Russia, EU-sceptic	-	9,4%	3,0%
Svoboda	1995	Ultra-nationalism	10,4%	4,7%	2,2%
Party of regions*	1997	Pro-Russia, EU-sceptic	30,0%	-	-
Self-reliance	2012	Liberal conservatism, Christian democracy	-	11,0%	0,6%
Democratic Alliance for Reform	2010	Liberalism	14,0%	-	-
Civic Position	2005	Liberalism	-	3,1%	1,0%
European Party of Ukraine	2006	Liberalism	-	-	-
Power of the People	2014	Liberalism	-	-	-
People's Front	2014	Nationalism, conservatism	-	22,1%	-
Communist Party of Ukraine	1993	Pro-Russia, communism	13,2%	-	-
Socialist Party of Ukraine*	1991	Social democracy	-	-	-
Radical Party	2010	Nationalism, populism	-	7,5%	-

Source: Election Guide 2019; Herron 2024, 355; Shevel 2015, 160.

A dash indicates that the party did not stand in the relevant elections.

\*Banned after Russia's full-scale invasion

of Crimea in 2014, which led to a weakening of the pro-Russian camp. From 2014 until today, most parties have been positioned on the centre-right or right of the political spectrum. Finally, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 several pro-Russian parties were forced to disband.

Consequently, the only Europarties that have found partners in Ukraine are the two major groups from the centre and the centre-right: the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE) and European People's Party (EPP). There have been no viable partners for the Party of European Socialists (PES) as most left-leaning parties were EU-sceptic and pro-Russian.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Types of Europarty influence and incentives for cooperation

According to von dem Berge and Poguntke (2013) there are two types of Europarty influence on non-EU parties in Central and Eastern Europe: first, Europarty pressure for organisational and programmatic adaptation in exchange for formal affiliation and second, the possibility that Europarties can exert indirect influence through a socialisation strategy by creating meeting arenas where norms and ideas are built and/or adapted. In the first type of influence, both sides act according to rationalist expectations of interest maximation and in the socialisation strategy the assumption is that, gradually, the domestic parties will internalise the norms and values of the Europarty (von dem Berge & Poguntke 2013, 321–23; see also von dem Berge 2017). According to theoretical expectations,

<sup>5</sup> There have been potential partners for the PES in Ukraine but they were either too insignificant like the *Socialist party of Ukraine* or chose to establish relations with other Europarties like the *Fatherland party*. (Holmes & Lightfoot 2011, 55). There are Ukrainian parties that are affiliated to other Europarties, such as the European Greens, but they have no significant role in Ukrainian politics.

Europarty direct influence is most probable in the first phase of recruitment while a more indirect and slow influence through socialisation is expected after affiliation.

When it comes to incentives for cooperation between Europarties and parties in Ukraine, previous enlargements indicate that there would seem to be a combination of strategic and ideational motives in both directions. As regards the Europarties, they have clearly been driven in the past by an ideational motive of promoting their norms and values (Shagina 2017, 211–12). However, in the case of Ukraine (as in other post-Soviet countries such as Moldova and Georgia) they have not necessarily focused on promoting their ideological principles but rather on propagating broader democratic values and fundamental human rights. Nevertheless, in light of the weak tradition of political ideologies in the post-Soviet countries, the Europarties were still keen to strengthen the existing liberal, social democratic, conservative, or left movements respectively.

**‘By spreading the values of democracy, human rights to the region through cooperation with affiliated parties, Europarties may act as levers of pressure on political elites on behalf of the EU.’**

From a strategic point of view, the Europarties have sought to secure channels of influence on national policymaking in Ukraine in order to reduce political risks and instability on the EU borders. To promote a democratic regime in Ukraine, the Europarties (in particular the EPP) were most interested in government parties or parties that aspired for a governing position. This double-headed incentive structure of both ideational and strategic aims may create an overlap, especially in relation to the broader issue of EU foreign policy in EU’s Eastern Partnership countries. By spreading the values of democracy, human rights to the region through cooperation with affiliated parties, Europarties may act as levers of pressure on political elites on behalf of the EU (Chryssogelos 2017, 263).

There is also a more straightforward motive of self-interest for the Europarties: new alliances mean the potential to grow and become more influential. Looking forward, in the case of future EU-membership for Ukraine, the affiliation of influential Ukrainian political parties in the Europarty family would mean more seats in the European Parliament and greater representation in the other institutions. There has thus also been an element of competition between the Europarties for potential partners. In the years before the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, the EPP was more successful in recruiting strong partner parties in the applicant countries. As a result, the balance of power between the Europarties shifted in favour of the EPP once the enlargement was implemented. In order to compete with the EPP, other Europarties started to apply the same pragmatic approach towards their potential partners in Ukraine. The most drastic step was taken by ALDE which began granting full membership to non-EU parties in order to offer them a more prestigious status (Shagina 2017, 101).

When it comes to the incentives for Ukrainian parties to cooperate with Europarties, previous studies indicate that both a need for legitimacy and a need for practical assistance are important (Delsoldato 2002, 275; Shagina 2017, 104–10). First, an affiliation with a Europarty means international recognition and a ‘stamp of approval’. This strengthens the party’s legitimacy in the domestic arena as it indicates that the party is serious and trustworthy. In Ukraine, where political parties’ ideologies are often diffuse, a Europarty affiliation can function as a form of identification: it shows where the party stands ideologically and its view on the EU. It may also help small and marginal parties in opposition to raise awareness of their existence among the population, as well as to gain prestige and raise self-esteem among the party members. Second, a Europarty affiliation may be used as a tool in election campaigns. Parties often refer to affiliation to strengthen their credibility and Europarty representatives actively support affiliated (or potentially affiliated) parties in election campaigns. Third, such cooperation provides knowledge and expertise on European party building. Through the affiliation, domestic parties are helped with the development of their organisation and party profile. This is especially useful for the broad catch-all parties with vague

ideological profiles; they are helped by the affiliation in the process of self-identification and crystallisation of their profile. A fourth motive can be perceived from a geopolitical point of view. A Europarty affiliation does not only mean support from the Europarty for the Ukrainian party in domestic politics but also for Ukraine's position in international politics. In the same vein, a Europarty affiliation may also be a platform for the party to contribute to the advancement of the country's EU-aspirations. Regular mutual visits and meeting create a familiarity with EU institutions and a network which provides informal opportunities to lobby for the country's further EU-integration.

## 5. Transnational party cooperation in Ukraine: possibilities, challenges and potential Europarty influence

This section presents the historical development of transnational party cooperation in the Ukrainian context and discusses both possibilities and challenges in realising the ambitions of both Europarties and the Ukrainian parties. According to theoretical expectations as outlined in the previous section, Europarty direct influence is expected to be most pronounced in the first phase of recruitment, while a more indirect way of influence through socialisation is expected after affiliation. For the purpose of the analysis of the Ukrainian case, a third phase after Russia's full-scale invasion can be discerned, as it had a profound effect on the cooperation.

### 5.1 Phase 1: Recruitment and evaluation

The first contacts between Europarties and counterparts in Ukraine started in the late 1990s, when the Ukrainian Christian Democratic Youth Union joined the youth section of the EPP (1998) and started lobbying for the EPP's opening to parties in Ukraine. However, it was not until after the Orange Revolution in 2004 and 2005 that the EPP became seriously interested in Ukraine. It was then followed by the PES and ALDE in search for partner parties (Timuş 2014, 58). However, it turned out that this was not an easy task. To identify partners is perhaps the most important – and at the same time the most difficult – step

in transnational party cooperation. Parties and party systems are unique in each country and the exact meaning of liberal, socialist, conservative or the left-right spectrum may differ from country to country. The Ukrainian context was even more complicated due to weak party organisations, recurrent splits and mergers and fluid ideological profiles. Consequently, it was crucial for each of the three Europarties to build up knowledge of the Ukrainian political landscape and specially to establish personal contacts.

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For this task, the Europarties needed partners on the ground that had local knowledge. As in other cases these 'local' partners were above all the German political foundations, which provide the Europarty to which they are connected with first-hand information on a party's ideological profile, its behaviour in parliament and its relations with other parties. In Ukraine, the most important are the EPP-linked Konrad Adenauer foundation, the PES-linked Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the ALDE-linked Friedrich Naumann Foundation. The Konrad Adenauer and Friedrich Ebert foundations were present in Ukraine as far back as the early 1990s, while the Friedrich Naumann foundation began working in Ukraine after the Orange revolution (Bader 2010, 119–21).<sup>6</sup> These foundations established (and still have) offices in Kyiv and they are often the first contact for a Europarty seeking to identify and select partners. And in some cases, as with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, they are also involved at a latter stage, providing advice on would-be affiliate parties' formal applications. Due to their daily work arranging courses, training programmes, scholarships and conferences where domestic Ukrainian parties are involved, these foundations have a good knowledge of the political terrain (Dakowska 2002, 287–88). Except for the German

<sup>6</sup> There are also Dutch foundations active in Ukraine for example the EPP-linked Eduardo Frei Foundation but their activities are less systematic and more focused on specific projects such as seminars and study visits.



foundations, the youth- and women's organisations from EPP and ALDE played an important role in Ukraine (Interview with Ukrainian MP *a*). They are more informal, and arrange events on certain themes and organize study visits and other kinds of joint activities both in Ukraine and in other countries to which Ukrainian politicians are invited. These activities have played an important role for Ukrainian politicians in building up a broad network of contacts in Western Europe as well as in other Eastern partnership countries.

Once the preparatory work is done, the formal application process starts. This plays an important role as it may put pressure on the applicant party to implement certain adaptations in order to be accepted. The procedure is basically the same for all three Europarties discussed here and consists of four steps:

1. The domestic party sends a formal application.
2. The application is reviewed by the Europarty on the basis of the norms and values that are defined in the statutes of the Europarty.
3. The Europarty organises a fact-finding mission to the country, if needed.<sup>7</sup>
4. The Europarty makes an assessment of the political situation in the country and of the applicant party and, finally, the Europarty's presidency decides on the application.

However, the fluid party landscape of Ukraine combined with the weak tradition of ideologies in the party system constituted a difficult challenge for the Europarties. The example of the Ukrainian party Rukh illustrates this dilemma. Rukh was the heir of the Ukrainian 'Popular front' against Soviet communism in 1989–1990. During the 1990s, it represented the main democratic (although somewhat nationalist) force in Ukrainian politics but it subsequently became a marginal party. Rukh applied for observer status with the EPP in 2002 but its application was not reviewed until after the Orange revolution in 2004, and it was then evaluated together with an application from the newly established party 'Our Ukraine' (under the leadership of Viktor Yushchenko).

Both parties were accepted as observers in 2006. However, the EPP's lack of knowledge of the political landscape and the marginal position of Rukh undermined the whole process. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation had organized the evaluation and arranged negotiations between Rukh and the EPP. The EPP itself did not make any fact-finding mission on their own. The process became even more complicated as the new force Our Ukraine contained different sections from Rukh. Consequently, the EPP failed to see that Rukh was not any more a potent political force and that in fact it was partly dissolving into the newly created party Our Ukraine. Finally, the EPP had to wait until this process ended and Our Ukraine was established as a proper political party before it proceeded with the application (Shagina 2017, 76).

'[T]he fluid party landscape of Ukraine combined with the weak tradition of ideologies in the party system constituted a difficult challenge for the Europarties.'

Aside from the Rukh example, there are several more examples of Europarties experiencing difficulties in finding partners in such a fluid party system. For the social democratic PES it was perhaps most difficult. In 2006, the Socialist Party of Ukraine, which the PES-linked political foundations in Ukraine counted as a partner, suddenly betrayed the ideals of the Orange revolution and joined a government with the pro-Russian Party of the Regions and the Communist party. Moreover, the party Fatherland (Batkivshchyna) had previously stated its interest in joining the Socialist International but surprised the PES-linked foundations by applying, in 2007, for affiliation with the EPP. Likewise, the liberal Friedrich Naumann Foundation was not amused when it found out in 2006 that the Party for Reform and Order, which they knew as a liberal party, had joined the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc which for many had a populist centre-left profile. (Bader 2010, 130).

The difficulties of selecting the right partners, in combination with a degree of competition between the EPP and ALDE, led to these Europarties

<sup>7</sup> The fact-finding mission is not a formal part of the process but it is often used.

**Table 3.** Transnational party affiliation in Ukraine

Ukrainian party	Europarty affiliation	Year of affiliation
Democratic Alliance for Reform	EPP – Associated	2013
Fatherland	EPP – Associated	2008
European Solidarity	EPP – Observer	2019
Self Reliance	EPP – Observer	2019
Servant of the People	ALDE – Full member	2022
Voice	ALDE – Full member	2020
European Party of Ukraine	ALDE – Full member	2013
Civic Position	ALDE – Affiliate	2016
Power of the People	ALDE – Affiliate	2018

Source: Websites of EPP and ALDE

adopting more pragmatic strategies. The same difficulties also existed to some degree in the 1990s among the EU-applicant countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the EPP became the front-runner of the ‘broad approach’ (Öhlén 2013, 175). In other words, instead of focusing on pure Christian democratic values, the EPP embarked on an open and pragmatic approach where all liberal and conservative parties were welcome as long as they supported human rights, democracy, and European integration. This strategy proved quite practical in Ukraine where the Christian democratic tradition was even weaker. The focus was instead to expand EPP’s influence in the post-Soviet region in the same way as in the post-Warsaw pact states. As former EPP leader Wilfried Martens puts it:

My long experience with the parties in Central and Eastern Europe has taught me that to create partnerships in politically unstable countries is very difficult and full of risks. But for a pan-European party like the EPP that is eager to disseminate its programme and values across the continent cannot wait [...]. We have always taken risks, and that is why we are the largest political movement in Europe. At the same time, I am convinced that the engagement of pan-European parties in countries like Ukraine actually contributes to political stability and democratic maturity. (Martens 2008, 2016)

The more pragmatic approach of the EPP and its focus on strategic channels of influence also meant a strong focus on size and influence of the applicant party. Consequently, in 2009 the EPP revised its statutes to allow suspension or exclusion

of a member party if it ‘has not been represented in regional or national or European parliaments for two consecutive parliamentary terms’ (EPP 2009, Article 9).

ALDE was traditionally a more principled party family than the EPP, in this respect, driven by liberal and pro-EU values (Öhlén 2013, 285). However, they too adapted to the more fluid party systems in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2004, ALDE’s then leader Graham Watson embarked on an expansionist strategy, seeking to match the EPP’s dominance. To do so it appeared necessary to apply a widening and more pragmatic strategy to recruit partners in future EU-member states. The emerging new post-communist parties provided a new momentum for liberal expansion and, like the EPP, ALDE sacrificed ideological cohesion in exchange for more partners. It loosened its ideological requirements and, being aware of the conservative tradition in Ukraine, ALDE decided that non-alignment on questions such as LGBT issues would not exclude parties from possible partnership. Finally, ALDE also decided to abandon having different levels of membership and instead offered full membership for non-EU parties (Shagina 2017, 99–101).

Today, ALDE has five member parties in Ukraine (see Table 3). It is worth noting that two of these parties have no parliamentary representation at all but are still accepted in the ALDE family. Clearly, they are less strict than the EPP in terms of demanding parliamentary representation; ALDE is smaller overall and tends to have smaller member parties. If they were to only accept ‘strong’ parties, they would lose many members. At the same time,

the experience of ALDE officials is that public opinion varies a lot in Ukraine and that parties without parliamentary representation today may have it tomorrow (Interview with ALDE official).

In summary, the fluid Ukrainian party system combined with competition between the EPP and ALDE, often for the same parties, resulted in a situation where both those Europarties applied an open strategy in order to gather many parties into their respective families. However, this generated another problem, namely the potential rivalry between the different affiliated parties. To be accepted into the Europarty the applicant party had to be accepted by the existing members, and another member party – a rival from the same country – could thus try to block its accession. In order to avert obstructive behaviour between sister parties and to encourage the consolidation of the democratic forces, Europarties have enforced an informal rule to wait for approval from already affiliated sister parties regarding new applicants.

## 5.2 Phase 2: Cooperation after affiliation

According to theoretical expectations of von dem Berge and Poguntke (2013), once a domestic party is formally affiliated to the Europarty, the primary instrument of Europarty influence is gone, or at least substantially weakened. From that point on, the main strategy of Europarty influence is through socialisation. By creating meeting arenas where common norms and ideas are formed, the Europarty can facilitate integration among the affiliated parties: newcomers are expected to internalise the values and code of behaviour of the party family (Von dem Berge & Poguntke 2013, 324).

Subsequently, once the parties in Ukraine had become affiliated with the EPP and ALDE (see table 3), they started taking part in the Europarty meetings, either as observers or (only for ALDE) as full members. This access to formal Europarty meetings strengthened the day-to-day cooperation between the Europarty and the Ukrainian affiliated parties. Moreover, after affiliation, assistance in terms of expertise and experience in certain matters became more systematic. As mentioned above, the main actors for assistance to Ukrainian affiliated parties are the German Europarty-linked political foundations. They organize trainings and seminars on a wide variety of topics such as party

organization, and the management of electoral campaigns (when it comes to the EPP-affiliated parties, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation has even advised individual parties or electoral blocs on the contents of their electoral manifestos). These courses and seminars are organized for the affiliated parties and for their youth sections. The youth sections are seen as especially important since they are more likely to be open for internalization of the norms of the party family. In addition to training seminars, the foundations also organise consultations with different political leaders within the party family and study visits where Ukrainian parties have the chance to get to know prominent politicians within the Europarty (Bader 2010, 120).

However, the theoretical expectation of large Europarty influence before affiliation and slow gradual influence through socialisation afterwards is not fully confirmed in the case of Ukraine. Since both EPP and ALDE loosened their ideological criteria, their potential influence on the Ukrainian parties was weak in the affiliation process. For example, ideological criteria could have been used more as a straightforward demand for adaptation in order to be accepted as an observer or full member. Consequently, if we are to expect that the Europarties had hopes that over time their Ukrainian partners would learn to become ‘good European liberals’ or ‘good European Christian democrats’ it was through the slow socialisation process after affiliation.

**[...] there is little evidence that Europarties have so far had any significant influence on their affiliated parties in Ukraine in terms of party organisation and ideological profile [...]**

Socialisation processes take time, and they depend on at least some engagement from the actors and some readiness to adapt. According to earlier studies, there is little evidence that Europarties have so far had any significant influence on their affiliated parties in Ukraine in terms of party organisation and ideological profile (see Bader 2010, 133; Shagina 2017, 214; Timuş 2014, 66). One example is the Fatherland party

(Batkishchyna), which joined the EPP in 2008 as the third Ukrainian party (see table 3) despite a clearly left-leaning party profile. The party leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, argued that the party combined centre-left and centre-right policies, but at the same time her government implemented a series of leftist policies that were hardly in line with EPP's centre-right position. The Fatherland party is also a collection of different ideological groups, such as the Socialist party and the Social Democratic party in Ukraine. This blurred ideological profile continued to characterise the party also after affiliation with the EPP. Moreover, the ALDE affiliated, newly established party of President Zelenskyy, Servant of the People (the party's name was taken from the TV series in which Zelenskyy had the main role) could be described as a broad umbrella for various groupings including socialists, Christian democrats and liberals with a vague, although officially liberal, profile (Interview with Ukrainian MP *b*). The only concrete Europarty influence identified in previous research concerned the youth- and women's wings of the affiliated parties. These sections were strengthened with training seminars and workshops and establishment of their own independent European networks. However, except for the inclusion of youth activists into party boards in some parties, the organizational change was minimal (Shagina 2017, 219).

Thus, Ukrainian parties affiliated to EPP and ALDE continued to be top-down leadership-based parties with vague ideological profiles and with weak links to society. The Ukrainian parties are also still plagued by a clientelist tradition, especially when it comes to private funding (Gherghina & Volintiru 2020, 689). The landslide victory of Servant of the People in the 2019 parliamentary elections was to a large degree thanks to citizens' disappointment with the previous party system and its perceived inability to solve the country's problems (Chaisty & Whitefield 2022, 123).

### 5.3 Phase 3: After Russia's full-scale invasion

The above analysis of the first two phases of Europarty activities in Ukraine points to a rather discouraging conclusion with clearly strategic or even cynical behavior from both sides. The Europarties were open for Ukrainian member parties despite them being inclined towards top-down leadership with vague ideologies and

weak links to society. The Ukrainian parties on the other hand tended to join the Europarties for instrumental rather than ideological reasons, as it gave external and domestic legitimacy and opportunities for party assistance. Any aspiration that Europarty affiliation may, over time, have been influencing the Ukrainian parties towards becoming somewhat more akin to mainstream West European parties – which link citizens to state and have a somewhat stable voter base and ideological platform – seemed farfetched at least in the short term.

**'Thus, the goal of Europarties in terms of transnational party cooperation transformed from partisan tendencies to a united aim to act on behalf of the EU in the political support for Ukraine.'**

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, however, had a profound effect on transnational party cooperation. First, the Europarties' aim of supporting parties which reflect their respective ideological positions was toned down even further. From the full-scale invasion and onwards they focused fully on supporting Ukraine in a broad sense rather than pursuing partisan interests. Second, the Ukrainian political situation changed in the sense that party politics to a certain extent disappeared as they were unified in the struggle for the very existence of their state (Interview with ALDE official). Thus, the goal of Europarties in terms of transnational party cooperation transformed from partisan tendencies to a united aim to act on behalf of the EU in providing political support for Ukraine. In this sense, the Europarties were now in a sense truly 'EU foreign policy actors' (see Chryssogelos 2017), but they also took on the role of spokespersons for the Ukrainian interests vis-à-vis the EU.

This new role is illustrated in several ways. First, the war has created a sense of urgency in the transnational party cooperation: it is no longer about day-to-day partisan politics but about life and death. Some leaders of affiliated parties that were not in government went to the front and it was not guaranteed that they would come back

(Interview with ALDE official).<sup>8</sup> The realization that the very existence of Ukraine was threatened strengthened the resolve of the Europarties to support Ukraine and its future in the EU. The ALDE family made sure to accept the Servant of the People party as a full member in June 2022 (Fox 2022), and this took place as an accelerated process due to the war (Interview with ALDE official). Moreover, both the EPP and ALDE urged the governments of EU member states to accept Ukraine as an EU-candidate country (Interview with EPP MEP).<sup>9</sup> The EPP, which has a wide network of EU heads of state and government, also coordinated its actions with Ukrainian politicians:

On the [question of] candidate status, the EPP helped us lobby in Austria, Belgium, Spain, you know the group of skepticism. I cannot forget that. We had joint tours even. [...] Let's say we were coordinating messages. You cannot come to Vienna with the same message as you have in Belgium. Basically, we were using the arguments they [the EPP] advised us, because they know how it works back home. (Interview with EPP MEP)

Second, the focus of cooperation changed. Instead of focusing on party organization and party ideology, attention was now on more practical issues, and especially, the preparation of the reforms needed to be accepted into the EU. The role of ALDE here is particularly important, as it is linked to Servant of the People, the majority party in the government of Ukraine. In the words of an ALDE official:

All the reforms and all the bits that need to be done, we are the ones who can help facilitate that they are actually making all the reforms [...] The Commission does a review twice a year and then they issue a report, but we work with them [Servant of the People] day-by-day the rest of the year. (Interview with ALDE official).

This view of a new phase of more intense cooperation concerning the practical reform work is shared by the Ukrainian side. For example, if a given party needs a quick assessment of new political initiatives, they may choose to ask their

Europarty. If they ask the European Commission, it might take time to get a formal answer, whereas through ALDE they could get a rapid response and rapid advice (Interview with Ukrainian MP *a*).

Third – on a somewhat speculative note – there seems to be a stronger readiness from the governing party, Servant of the People, to abide by the informal EU norms and values on how to organise a party in terms of rules, relations with voters, how to produce electoral programmes etc. According to a party official, one reason why they are more willing to abide by these norms may be because they are still a recently established party, created in 2017, but they are also literally a young party as they have intentionally recruited younger people with little or no political experience. Consequently, Servant of the People see the party model in Western Europe as a guide for how to develop their own party in contrast to how parties are normally built in Ukraine. This possible indication of a readiness to learn and to become a ‘standard European party’ seems to be connected to the fact that Servant of the People was accepted as a full member of the ALDE party in June 2022. Following that, there is a sense that Ukraine is one step closer to the EU and that the party’s ambition to appear as a credible and serious party is rewarded. Moreover, as full member of the ALDE party, Servant of the People representatives participate as equals in meetings and in various decisions. This provides a sense of belonging and inclusion and strengthens the resolve to ‘fit in’ even further (Interview with Ukrainian MP *a*).

## 6. Conclusion

The Europarties played an important role in the democratic development of the states which became members of the EU in 2004 and 2007, and in preparing them for membership. The aim of this analysis has been to assess whether they have been equally important in Ukraine’s democratic development and in preparing it for future EU-membership, and how, more generally, the interaction between Europarties and Ukrainian political parties has played out. Ukraine has several similarities with the countries of the 2004/2007 EU enlargements but there are also differences.

<sup>8</sup> See also Epstein & Sheth (2022) on former President Poroshenko on the frontline.

<sup>9</sup> See also ALDE (2022).

Ukraine is a post-Soviet country with closer historical ties to Russia and a more personalised political system due to its semi-presidential constitution and, moreover, since February 2022, it has been forced to defend itself in the face of a full-scale invasion by its larger neighbour. Two conclusions and a reflection on the future development can be drawn from the analysis above.

*The first conclusion* is that the Europarties' attempts to foster a transformation of the Ukrainian party system into a traditional (West) European model have not, so far, been successful. In general, Europarty incentives for expanding their party family consist of both ideational and strategic motives. The aim had generally been to spread and strengthen the ideology of the party family and at the same time increase its size and influence in the European Parliament though gaining additional member parties. However, in Ukraine the ideational incentives of the Europarties were broadened into more general aims of strengthening democracy, human rights, and rule of law etc. Moreover, the competition between the EPP and ALDE (often competing for links with the same parties in Ukraine) led to a softening of both ideological and organizational membership criteria. The legacy of patrimonial communism was also more entrenched in the Ukrainian party system than in the countries of the previous EU enlargements, with vague social cleavages, weak anchorage in civil society, frail ideological underpinnings and clientelist tendencies. Therefore, despite years of activities with bilateral party meetings, courses, training seminars, study visits etc. there has so far been no substantial transformation of the main character of the affiliated Ukrainian parties, who rather saw the Europarty affiliation as an instrument for strengthening their domestic legitimacy.

*The second conclusion* is that although the Europarties failed in transforming the Ukrainian party system, they have played an important role in supporting Ukraine's EU integration process. This support became even more important after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. They have supported their sister parties morally and practically, encouraging the parties to keep working for a democratic and pro-EU Ukraine. But perhaps even more important is the support from the Europarties in Ukraine's ambition of attaining EU

candidate status. The EPP – the most influential Europarty – was especially important in this regard. It lobbied in favour of Ukraine's candidate status on social media, in the European Parliament, and in coordinated tours with the Ukrainian parties to convince the more sceptic EU member state governments. Here lies the potential strength of the Europarties: they are not strong actors *per se* but have wide networks which include political leaders and key actors in the EU institutions whose acceptance is a condition for EU-applicant countries. Moreover, the Europarties have worked intensively to support Ukraine in making reforms that gradually prepare the country for future EU-membership. ALDE has worked especially closely with the governing Servant of the People party on the reforms that are needed for the country to be accepted into the EU.

**'One optimistic scenario is that after the war, and with continued help from the Europarties, Ukraine will make real progress in pushing through all the reforms needed for EU-membership.'**

From the above, we can discuss potential paths forward for Ukraine. One optimistic scenario is that after the war, and with continued help from the Europarties, Ukraine will make real progress in pushing through all the reforms needed for EU-membership. Should there be a change of government, there will most likely be EPP-affiliated parties in the new governing coalition, which means that the direct channels to EU actors will still be there, and support and advice will still be available. Moreover, following the granting of candidate status there is a stronger willingness among the affiliated parties in Ukraine to learn and become more integrated into the 'European party model' in terms of organisation and ideological underpinnings. However, a more pessimistic scenario is that Ukraine's party system will continue to be characterised by blurred ideologies, clientelism and weak anchorage in civil society. This, combined with economic and social problems in post-war Ukraine may open doors for more populist and nationalist rhetoric. The Europarties, which have included the Ukrainian parties through

‘softened’ membership criteria are somewhat trapped; for moral and geopolitical reasons they feel an obligation to actively support Ukraine’s EU integration process. They will certainly do so also for strategic reasons: Ukrainian EU membership would strengthen both the EPP and ALDE in the European parliament and potentially in the Council.

\* \* \*

The Europarties have so far played (and continue to play) an important role in facilitating Ukraine’s EU integration process. However, the competition between them and the fluid character of Ukraine’s party system have led to a softening of membership criteria, and the affiliated Ukrainian parties have so far shown no indication of transforming into the ‘European model’. Political parties and stable party systems that mobilize, aggregate, and represent different societal interests and ideas are of central

importance for a functioning and stable democracy. The Europarties’ efforts to support Ukrainian parties and Ukraine in its fight for independence, democracy and a future path to EU-membership is clear; it is commendable and should be recognized. But the enthusiasm may overshadow the potential risks. Therefore, it is crucial that in the next few years the Europarties not only continue their support but also use all their political weight to convince their affiliated parties of the necessity to develop according to the original expectations and membership criteria. In the same vein, it is vital that the political parties in Ukraine not only see the instrumental value of Europarty affiliation, but also use the West European experience of the political party and its roles in a democracy in their own learning process towards becoming mature and stable parties. Only then can Ukraine’s hoped for transition towards becoming a fully mature democracy and an EU member not only be realized but also be a lasting success.

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