

Titel:

Does the europarty still not matter? European elections 2019 and the Party of European Socialists

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Kurzzusammenfassung

The chapter takes stock of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and its campaign for the European elections 2019. Looking at key trends, the author argues that the PES is gaining more influence in the political arena of the European Union. More financial resources, changing dynamics among PES member parties due to diverging electoral results and the key role of the PES secretariat in running the Spitzenkandidat campaign made the PES an important actor in the centre-left political party family during the campaign.

Schlagworte

Political campaigning, Party funding, Spitzenkandidaten, Social democracy, Europarties

1. Introduction

The elections to the European Parliament (EP) in May 2019 were an important event for the direction of European integration. Brexit, controversial trade deals, but also a growing threat of anti-EU political parties increased awareness among voters of European politics. Voter turnout increased by around eight percent points from 42.6% to 50.6% (European Parliament 2019a).

This paper will put the spotlight on the Party of European Socialists (PES). The European elections 2019 provide an opportunity to analyse the role of europarties, as the elections were the second time round for the *Spitzenkandidaten*, and only the third time that europarties actively engaged in European elections. Europarties form part of the system of European party families that also include the party groups in the EP and the national parties. They are “an institutionalized form of party organization at the EU level that has seen partial transfer of sovereignty from national member parties” (Hertner 2011, p. 322). This article will not touch upon the EP political group, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), nor the role of the national parties that form the PES. While these actors do play a role in European elections, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

The PES is an interesting case among europarties. It is comprised of political parties from various background. While the PES is a pro-European party of the centre-left, ideological differences exist in several policy areas. It therefore exemplifies the challenge for europarties to unite diverging views. Understanding the behaviour in election times is of a distinctive interest, as election campaigning requires some form of cohesion. Decision-making in this context will be relevant for the topic in general.

There are competing strands in the literature on europarties. A number of authors question the influence of europarties over either their constituent parties or the EU, depicting them as irrelevant. Contrarily, I will make the case here that europarties are in fact a moving target, and that we can observe trends of growing influence of the PES in electoral times.

Building on a research review, document analysis and expert interviews with PES staff, I will first describe the role of the PES in electoral times. Then I will present three underlying trends: First, I will discuss the implications of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process in 2019 for the PES. Secondly, I will look at the financial resources of the PES. Thirdly, I will argue that diverging electoral results change the dynamics among member parties, leaving more “room for manoeuvre”.

2. The role of europarties in preparing electoral campaigns

The growing influence of the EP in legislation facilitated the need to forge political alliances beyond national parties. As a result, socialist parties in Europe started intensifying their ties in the second half of the 20th century. The PES was formally founded in 1992 (Hanley 2007, p. 479). By 2004, the legal framework of the EU acknowledged europarties with the adoption of a European Party Regulation.¹ In 2007, an amendment of this regulation clarified that europarties can spend money in campaigning for European elections, which they did for the first time in 2009. As Hertner (2011, p. 326) points out, these changes did not occur passively overtime. They were the result of intensive lobbying by europarties. The European elections 2019 are the third time that europarties are engaging in a European electoral campaign.

Put et al. (2016, p. 12) describe europarties as subordinate to their respective political groups in the EP. Hanley (2007, p. 275) argues that national parties are reluctant to give up control and remain in charge, leaving europarties with limited autonomy. Külahci (2010, p. 1284) underlines that europarties are not conventional political parties, but fora which allow the

¹ Regulation (EC) No 2004/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding.

interaction between member parties. In his point of view, europarties are in a principal-agent relationship vis-à-vis national parties. They are an agent that can overcome collective action problems, but cannot force implementation. Consequently, secretariats of europarties bear little agency, and it is member parties that decide, either in working groups or on a party congress (Mittag & Steuerer 2010, p. 82). In this perspective, they are not to be taken seriously as “parties” because they do not function as a “transmission belt” between voters and policy outcomes (Kühlaci & Lightfoot 2014, p. 76), as political parties ought to.

Switek (2016, p. 737) points out that this type analysis is often biased by perceptions of what role europarties should play. For this analysis, I will consider europarties as international organisations *sui generis*. Europarties do perform certain tasks in the European political arena that cannot be performed by national parties, such as structuring the legislative process and distributing positions in the executive. More importantly, they are a research target that is in evolution.

In electoral times, europarties play an increasingly important role as masters of ceremony, as Kühlaci and Lightfoot (2014, p. 75) point out. Responsibilities include the administrative organisation of the selection procedure for the *Spitzenkandidat*, but also the implementation of the election campaign.

A key task is the drafting of an election manifesto. The manifesto is an important document to mobilize member parties for the campaign, and one of the few formal documents that represents the combined views of europarty members, “as a symbol of transnational values and policy commitments” (Hertner 2011, p. 333). It also serves as an input for national parties’ own manifestos (Gagatek 2009, p. 33; also Interview 1, 2). Finally, the manifesto is the programme of the *Spitzenkandidat* (Interview 2, 3, 4).

It is the PES secretariat that drafts the first text, manages the amendment process and moderates discussions and negotiations among member parties, who are represented in the PES Bureau, the body that adopts the manifesto before sending it for approval to the party congress (Interview 1, 2).

For the European elections 2019, the drafting of the manifesto was initiated with eight thematic resolutions that were adopted during a party congress in December 2018. Subsequently, they were distilled into the election manifesto itself, which was adopted in February 2019. The PES secretariat undertook considerable efforts and held consultations with non-governmental organisations and frequent *network meetings* with stakeholders to draft these documents. PES

activists – members of PES member parties who pro-actively register to be informed about PES activities – were asked on their priorities within the resolutions (Interview 4). While member parties did have the final say, there was considerable margin to the secretariat (Interview 1, 2).

Manifestos used to be “an internal document of lowest common denominator unity, often full of opt outs and clarifications” (Kühlaci & Lightfoot 2014, p. 77, see also Switek 2015, p. 119; Put et al. 2016, p. 12). The importance of unanimity remains high nowadays, and there are instances where the lowest common denominator is the outcome. However, there seems to be a trend towards a more open attitude regarding dissent. In 2019, the PES aimed for a short manifesto with a clear language that campaigners across Europe could use in their activities, also with a view to engaging PES activists (Interview 4). Perhaps consequently, member parties might have changed their behaviour as well. For instance, it is suggested that in certain occasions member parties would not object to a political demand, but simply announce that they would not advertise for it in their national campaign (Interview 2).

3. The implications of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process

As Put et al. (2016, p. 9) put it, the introduction of the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* during the 2014 European elections were a “landmark in the history“ (ibid.) for europarties. They highlight that it is the first political recruitment process in the history of europarties, an important party function up until then reserved to national parties. The ultimate success of the European People’s Party’s *Spitzenkandidat* Jean-Claude Juncker to become Commission President was a decisive win for the europarties (and the EP) in the institutional power game of the EU (Switek 2016, p. 741).

In 2019, the PES Bureau adopted a paper laying down the procedure by which a common candidate should be selected in June 2018 (PES Presidency 2018). This paper largely replicated the procedure of 2014. It originally foresaw the final election of the common candidate by December 2018, which was later postponed to a formal endorsement of the candidate on a party congress in February 2019 (Interview 1, 2).

While the PES undertook efforts to include individual members in the *Spitzenkandidat* selection, a consensus among member parties emerged to leave this question to national parties, who for the most part undertook limited efforts to include their membership. However, the PES secretariat planned to consult PES activists if several candidates had upheld their candidature (Interview 4).

Maroš Šefčovič from the Slovakian member party and Frans Timmermanns from the Dutch member party, both incumbent Commissioners, reached the threshold to be candidate. In November 2018, Šefčovič pulled out of the race when it became evident that he would not find support among PES Heads of Government. Frans Timmermanns was confirmed *Spitzenkandidat* in February 2019 (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4).

There were no formal ties between the process of drafting the manifesto and the selection of the *Spitzenkandidat*, although the manifesto was also the program of the *Spitzenkandidat*. (Interview 1, 3) However, the PES secretariat provided the *Spitzenkandidat* with the opportunity to intervene informally (Interview 1, 3). Moreover, candidates could influence the procedure via their respective national parties (Interview 3).

In the weeks approaching the election date, the PES secretariat turned into a *Spitzenkandidat support team* (Interview 1, also Interview 3, 4). It coordinated the activities and events of the *Spitzenkandidat* with the respective local parties. PES staffers were responsible for specific countries and would monitor news, prepare briefings and coordinate with local parties before events and appearances. During this phase, the PES secretariat and the *Spitzenkandidat* would act and decide autonomously without interference of national parties. Its role was that of a “service provider” (Interview 1, 3) and member parties heavily used its services. “Most parties saw a big added value of the *Spitzenkandidat* and were glad when Frans [Timmermanns; P.C.] would come” (Interview 1). Indeed, the PES secretariat had to prioritize the appearances of the *Spitzenkandidat*. According to Interview 3, the PES was striving to give the *Spitzenkandidat* fora in which he would bring the most added value for national parties, noting that, in the absence of transnational lists, citizens could vote for national parties, but (except in the Netherlands) not for the *Spitzenkandidat* himself (Interview 3).

Further, the PES secretariat supported its activists with a dedicated budget for activities that would promote the *Spitzenkandidat* and the PES campaign and involved activists when Timmermanns would have an appearance (Interview 4).

4. Financial resources of europarties

An important factor of any organisational impact are financial resources. As Haughton (2012, p. 16) puts it, “[m]oney is the fuel for the engines of party politics”. Public funding creates a stabilizing effect on parties (ibid., p. 11), as it allows them to organize events, to pay staff and organize campaigns. Europarties receive most of their funding from the budget of the EU, provided under the rules of the European Party Regulation. The funding by the EU covers “up

to 90% of the reimbursable expenditure of a party, while the rest should be covered by own resources such as membership fees and donations” (European Parliament 2019b).

It is only since the entry into force of this regulation in 2004 that europarties have their own offices and staff. Before, they borrowed from their respective parliamentary groups in the EP, making them largely subordinate to their EP groups (Hertner 2011, p. 326). An amendment in 2007 of the regulation clarified that europarties could use EU funding for their election campaigns, which they did for the first time in the European elections 2009 (Hertner 2011, p. 327).

Figure 1 represents the funding situation of the PES between 2004 and 2019. The funding received by the EU general budget grew significantly from 1,257,000 Euro in 2004 to 11,475,000 Euro in 2019, representing a tenfold increase (European Parliament 2019b).

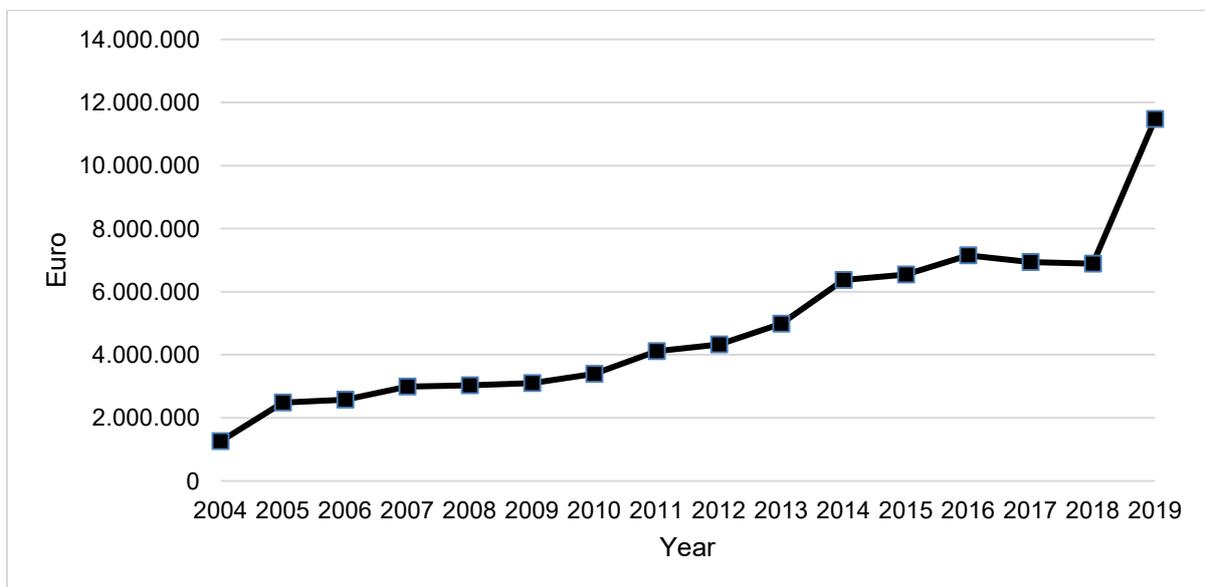


Figure 1: Funding to PES received by the European Union

Source: Authors’ illustration, based on European Parliament (2019b)

Especially notable is the sharp increase in public funding between 2018 and 2019. The entry into force of a revised European Party Regulation further improved the funding situation for all europarties, while also increasing transparency and democratic legitimacy (Schmälder & Haußner 2019). Specifically, the revised regulation increased the threshold of spending to be reimbursed by the EU budget from 85% to 90%. This implies that for every euro received by membership fees, donations and other sources, europarties receive a top-up of 9 euros by the EU budget. Before the amendment, the top-up represented about 5.66 euros. This change in regulation was the result of intensive lobbying efforts by europarties with a view to better resources in the European elections (Interview 1).

According to Hertner (2011, p. 327), in 2009, the PES spent 188.521 Euro on their campaign. In 2014, this amount increased substantially to about 650.000 Euro (Schmälder & Haußner 2019). For 2019, no public data was available yet at the time of writing. However, according to PES staffers, the campaign again invested significantly more than in previous elections (Interview 1, 2).

5. Electoral results of PES member parties

The run-up to the European elections 2019 was marked by the popular conviction that social democratic parties in Europe found themselves in a miserable situation. For instance, Karnitschnig (2018) asked in Politico, “Who killed European social democracy?” and postulated the “collapse of the centre left”. Data by Döring and Manow (2019) show that, indeed, the social democratic parties witnessed a downward trend over the five years prior to the European elections 2019.

As Figure 2 shows, the number of member parties in national opposition increased from 10 to 17, meaning that, as of May 2019, more than half of PES member parties were in opposition. The diverging electoral results changed the power dynamics among member parties. Especially the Portuguese and Spanish parties gained influence, also reflected by the fact that the congresses in December 2018 and February 2019 were held in Lisbon and Madrid respectively (Interview 2, 3).

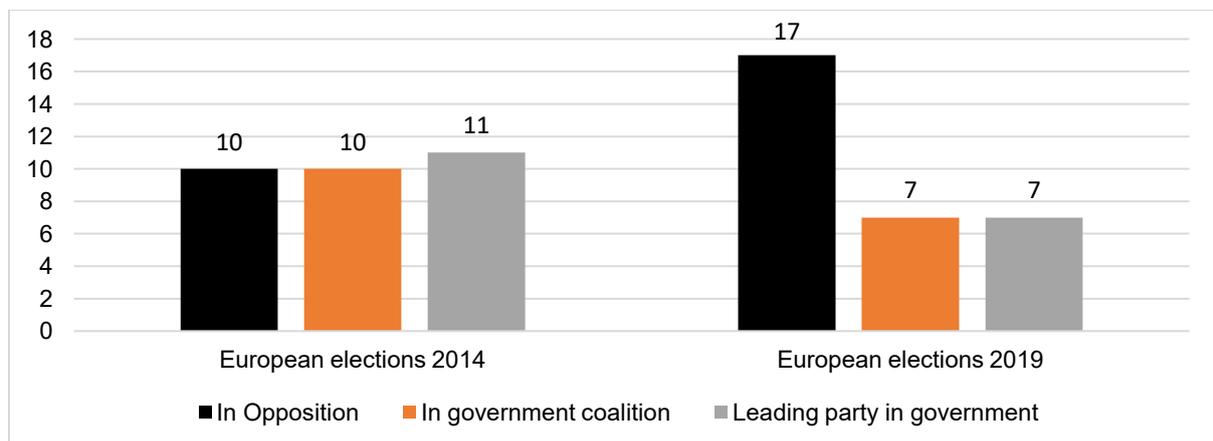


Figure 2: National government participation of PES member parties, on 23 May 2019

Source: Author’s illustration, based on Döring & Manow (2019)

This is meaningful, as some scholars suggest that PES member parties in government tend to oppose strong party structures on the European level. Opposition parties, on the other hand, use the europarty as an avenue to communicate and coordinate with like-minded parties (Switek 2016, p. 739). However, while PES member parties in Denmark, Sweden and Finland indeed

follow this logic, others do not. Member parties in Spain and Portugal, while in government, followed an assertive approach towards the PES, partly because they wanted to increase their influence (Interview 1, 3). Others, such as the German SPD, traditionally have an engaging approach towards the europarty (Interview 1). In general, parties seem to become more engaging with the europarty as European politics becomes more salient (Interview 3).

At the same time, engagement in the europarty structures such as the working groups preparing the manifesto requires personnel and financial resources, which poses a challenge especially for smaller member parties (Interview 2, 3). In addition, member parties such as the French PS had to face financial challenges as a result of decreasing voter turnout. Consequently, they had to reduce their national campaign spending and perceived the *Spitzenkandidat* and the PES election campaign as a helpful resource (Interview 2).

The outcome of the European elections 2019 is nuanced. Figure 3 presents the electoral results of PES member parties. It should be noted that the S&D includes MEPs that are not currently member of a PES member party. For the ninth EP legislature, this includes four Polish MEPs and three Hungarian MEPs.

A first important point is that, for about half the member parties, 2019 electoral results did not differ from the results in 2014 by more than five percentage points. The S&D remained the second biggest group in the EP.

Table 1: Outcome of PES member parties in the European Elections 2019²

	European elections 2014		European elections 2019		Change	
	Vote share (%)	Number of MEPs	Vote share (%)	Number of MEPs	Vote share (% points)	Number of MEPs
PSOE, Spain	23.01	14	32.84	20	9.83	6
PvdA, Netherlands	9.40	3	18.90	6	9.50	3
SD, Slovenia	8.02	1	18.65	2	10.63	1
SDE, Estonia	13.60	1	23.30	2	9.70	1
BSP, Bulgaria	18.93	4	24.24	5	5.31	1
SDP Saskaņa, Latvia	13.04	1	17.45	2	4.41	1
PL/MLP, Malta	53.39	3	54.29	4	0.90	1
PS, Portugal	34.01	8	33.38	9	-0.63	1
SDP, Croatia	29.93	2	18.71	3	-11.22	1
SLD (UP), Poland	9.44	5	38.47	5	29.03	0
S, Denmark	19.10	3	21.50	3	2.40	0
SDP, Finland	12.30	2	14.60	2	2.30	0
DIKO, Cyprus	10.83	1	13.10	1	2.27	0

² The Bulgarian BSP, the Greek PASOK and the Romanian PSD ran in electoral coalitions in 2014. The Polish SLD ran in an electoral coalition in 2014 together with the UP, another PES member party, and in a broader electoral coalition in 2019. The Belgian PS and sp.a and the SDLP in the United Kingdom only ran in subnational entities in their member states, but their vote share is depicted in relation to the national electorate.

PS, Luxembourg	11.73	1	12.09	1	0.36	0
SPÖ, Austria	24.09	5	23.90	5	-0.19	0
PASOK, Greece	8.02	2	7.70	2	-0.32	0
S, Sweden	24.19	5	23.60	5	-0.59	0
PS, Belgium	10.68	2	9.58	2	-1.10	0
LSDP, Lithuania	17.26	2	15.93	2	-1.33	0
Sp.a, Belgium	8.30	1	6.13	1	-2.17	0
Labour, Ireland	5.33	0	3.14	0	-2.19	0
SDLP, United Kingdom	<i>*no data available</i>	0	0.37	0	<i>*no data available</i>	0
MSZP, Hungary	10.90	2	6.66	1	-4.24	-1
SMER SD, Slovakia	24.09	4	15.72	3	-8.37	-1
ČSSD, Czech Republic	14.17	4	3.95	0	-10.22	-4
PSD, Romania	37.60	16	22.56	10	-15.04	-6
PS-PRG, France	13.98	13	6.19	5	-7.79	-8
Labour, United Kingdom	25.40	20	14.08	10	-11.32	-10
SPD, Germany	27.30	27	15.80	16	-11.50	-11
PD, Italy	40.81	31	22.69	19	-18.12	-12
<i>Average vote share/total number of MEPs</i>	19.96	183	19.27	146	-0.70	-37

Source: Authors' illustration, based on Döring & Manow (2019)

The significant gains of the Dutch member party confirmed the so-called *Spitzenkandidat* effect. Another of the most successful PES member parties was the Spanish PSOE, gaining 9.83 percentage points in voter turnout and six additional seats. This is especially noteworthy as it made the Spanish delegation the biggest within the S&D. Spanish MEP Iratxe García Pérez became President of the Group following the European elections.

That being said, it was especially member parties in the biggest member states, notably in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and France, that had to face significant losses. This explains the sharp reduction of PES MEPs, as these losses were not offset (in terms of seats) by the gains in smaller countries such as the Netherlands, Slovenia, or Estonia.

6. Conclusion

The paper suggests that certain research findings on the irrelevance of europarties do not accurately reflect the status quo and neglect the significant evolution of the research subject. I showed that more financial resources, changing dynamics among PES member parties due to diverging electoral results and the key role of the PES secretariat in running the *Spitzenkandidat* campaign made the PES an important actor in the centre-left political party family during the campaign.

However, the aftermath of the European elections 2019, namely the nomination by the European Council and subsequent confirmation in the EP of German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission, will have an impact on the future role

of europarties. If the European elections 2014 were a big win for europarties, this episode must have been a loss for them. At the same time, the President-elect of the Commission underlined that she would work towards ensuring the *Spitzenkandidat* principle. The idea of transnational lists was abandoned for the European elections 2019, but it might come back. If so, it will have an impact on europarties and their role within the European political system.

The shifting power dynamics within europarties and especially the PES was touched here only briefly, but could be further expanded. Conflicts and different cultures between member parties in the North and South, but also between East and West need to be further analysed. The PES' conduct towards its Romanian member party, whose membership was frozen in April 2019, is a key issue to watch.

Finally, the relation between the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the europarty secretariats begs further research. As has been described in this chapter, the secretariat was vital for the implementation of the campaign. It remains open, however, if this was a specific situation for the PES in 2019 or whether indeed europarties are key for this kind of transnational campaigning.

Interviews

Interview 1: 2019, July 30; PES staffer.

Interview 2: 2019, September 2; PES staffer.

Interview 3: 2019, September 26; PES staffer.

Interview 4: 2019, October 1; PES staffer.

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