VIII The Role of European Political Parties to Broaden the European Union's Legitimacy

Edwin van Rooyen and Gerrit Voerman

A large gulf still exists between Europe and its citizens. Political parties, which fulfil a mediatory role between citizens and governments, would have been able to help broaden the legitimacy of the European Union (EU). To what degree have they done so? A first way to answer this question involves determining the extent to which the process of European integration has received substantive support from parties. A second way entails examining the extent to which political parties have succeeded in forming European parties (also referred to here as 'Europarties') that represent citizens in the European parliament and reinforce democratic control at European level – and thereby create more opportunities for greater involvement among citizens. In the Netherlands, the larger, potential government parties were in favour of a supranational Europe, but very little of this support remains today. National political parties in Europe may indeed have started working together, but true party formation has only got off the ground to a limited extent. Greater EU legitimacy could be realised by taking institutional measures, such as the introduction of a partial European electoral list for European Parliament elections and the implementation of individual membership for Europarties. This will require the support of national parties, but they are often unwilling to offer this because they fear it will weaken their interests. Support for European integration and the formation of a Europarty is subject to limits, as will be demonstrated below.

Introduction

The issue of accountability and legitimacy of the European Union is a topic that has already occupied political scientists for a long time and did become socially significant during the past few years. 'Europe' is now a politically sensitive theme in EU member countries, particularly since the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty held in 2005. Spain, France, the Netherlands, Ireland and Luxembourg held referendums, with the French, Dutch and Irish voting 'no'. The replacement Treaty of Lisbon has since been ratified, but the government's approval due to the absence of a referendum has been criticised within the Netherlands.[1]

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[1]   The treaty came into force on 1 December 2009.

Accountability, i.e. rendering account to citizens, has a political and an administrative aspect. Within the European context, political accountability relates mostly to the selection and censure of the European Commission. The authority of the European Parliament in this regard has increased over the course of time, but is still subject to limits. The Parliament does indeed have the power to force the entire European Commission to resign, but cannot dismiss individual Commission members. The Parliament can reject the President of the European Commission nominated by the European Council, but not a nominated Commission member: it is only possible if the Parliament voices its disapproval of the nomination and exerts pressure on the Commission President to appoint a replacement. Political accountability in the EU also relates to decision-making in the European Council of Ministers, which occurs behind closed doors. As a result, national parliaments cannot perform their supervisory task properly, at least not in relation to the European actions of their ministers.[2] Researchers assume that the position of power of ministers in a European sphere compared to national parliaments and their own parties is strengthened as a result thereof.[3]

The system of 'ministerial responsibility' exists at national level for the sake of administrative accountability. Ministers give account for the actions of 'their' officials. Such a system does not exist in the EU. Individual commissioners can be reproached for developing insufficient initiatives within their policy area or for not being sufficiently decisive, but no procedure exists to dismiss them. In addition, there is no culture within the Commission where a commissioner or high-ranking official will resign out of a sense of duty.

The 'democratic deficit' of the European Union is a broader concept that also includes the lack of the right of initiative for the European Parliament – reserved exclusively for the European Commission – and restrictions on the right to approve the budget. Greater openness and transparency in European policy and decision-making could increase the democratic value of the EU – the desire for this is well-known. A permissive consensus in favour of European integration still existed among the European public during the 1950s and 1960s. A large majority of European citizens in all member countries were either disinterested in European integration, and therefore had no opinion about the actions of their governments in that area, or supported by and large the efforts of their governments to deepen European cooperation.[4] Support among the population and legitimacy in turn have declined over the years. This can be deduced from European surveys conducted since 1973 and from the turnout figures for European elections, which

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[2]   This is not applicable when a ratification procedure is attached to the decision-making process of the Council. In that case, governments have to obtain the approval of their parliaments.

[3]   T. Raunio 'Why European integration increases leadership autonomy within political parties', *Party Politics,* volume 8, number 4, 2002, pp. 405-22.

[4]   S. Hix *The Political System of the European Union*, Houndmills and London, 2005, pp. 134-135.

show a decline from the outset.[5] Elections for the European Parliament are considered 'second order', which means they are viewed as less important than elections for the national parliament. Yet another aspect of the democratic deficit has been indicated here. Partly because of the fact that it is only possible to vote for candidates of national parties in all member countries, elections for the European Parliament are never truly European elections: election campaigns remain stuck in national discussions about European themes. The European Parliament does not therefore represent a European electorate but a multitude of national electorates instead, which does not benefit its legitimacy. Moreover, European elections do not share the same significance as on a national level: members of the European Parliament are indeed elected directly by the population, but the result of these elections does not have an effect on the question who obtains power within the EU. A European government is not formed, after all. The European Parliament can still count on receiving attention during elections. Afterwards, however, it is almost completely absent for five years. Political parties provide ministers and parliamentary members who take decisions on EU level, and also about possible changes to the institutional EU structure.[6] But this is not the only reason why it is good to focus on the role of national political parties in a European context. Since time immemorial, political parties and interest groups have been the key linkage pins between citizens and government and in turn *the* central connecting mechanism between both domains. 'Interest group activity creates a system of functional representation operating alongside electoral representation', write the British political scientists Hague and Harrop, while political parties, according to them, are 'a necessary instrument in shaping the collective interest'. What political parties have signified and can signify in the relationship between the citizen and European government is therefore an important question.

It must not be forgotten that political parties fulfil a relatively limited role nowadays because of two fundamental developments: an external one, where the centre of political parties has shifted from civil society to the state and its institutions, and an internal one, where parties of mass movements have changed into organisations that are dominated by office holders.[7] In other words: 'mass parties' have made way for 'cadre parties' and have become increasingly dependent on the state for their continued existence due to dwindling membership. Civil societies allow themselves to be represented less and less by political parties than in the

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[5] Ibidem, p. 135. The turnout figures for European member countries are respectively 61.99% (1979), 58.98% (1984), 58.41% (1989), 56.67 % (1994), 49.51% (1999), 45.47% (2004) and 43.0%. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/turnout_en.html.

[6] National parliamentary members also play a role here of course.

[7] Or, in the words of Katz and Mair, the 'party in public office' has won considerable ground from the 'party on the ground'. R. Katz and P. Mair, *Party Organizations: A Data Handbook on Party Organizations in Western Democracies, 1960-90*, London, 1992.

past. As a result, they are confronted by a serious legitimacy problem. When we refer to the significance of political parties in the relationship between citizens and European government, we must therefore realise that this significance is relatively limited from the very start. It appears, incidentally, that European integration has exacerbated, as such, the legitimacy problem of national political parties. Due to the transfer of administrative powers to European level, a certain erosion of the policy competition between political parties has occurred, according to the Irish political scientist Mair. This apparently happened in relation to the scope for policymaking, policy instruments and the policy repertoire at the disposal of parties. Parties are therefore said to have fewer opportunities to create a distinct profile for themselves in relation to other parties.[8]

European integration position

What have national political parties now done to increase the legitimacy of the European Union? One way of answering this question is to evaluate the substantive positions of parties with respect to European integration. Do parties lend support to European cooperation and thereby contribute to the acceptance of 'Europe' among their members and the electorate? Various studies, from a comparative perspective as well, have been carried out on national and European election manifestos. We will limit ourselves here to the substantive positions taken by Dutch parties during the period 1951-2005.[9] We believe that the Dutch case is interesting because of the 'no' proclaimed during the referendum of 2005. How have Dutch political parties – including the VVD – dealt with European integration before and after 2005?

In the years following the Second World War, the five potential government parties in Dutch politics, the two Protestant-Christian parties ARP and CHU, the Catholic KVP, the social-democratic PvdA and the liberal VVD – which jointly occupied the majority of parliamentary seats – held differing positions on European integration. The PvdA and the KVP – the largest parties at that time – were the most positive, the CHU and the VVD were reserved to a lesser or greater extent, and the ARP was absolutely dismissive. Considerable value was attached to the independent position that the Netherlands had taken in the world. Within a short period, however, these last-mentioned parties changed their positions. On the one hand, this was due to the dire economic situation in the Netherlands

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[8]   With the policy repertoire, Mair refers to the prohibition of administrative practices that impede the functioning of the free market. He points to the process of negative integration. P. Mair 'Political Parties and Party Systems', in: P. Graziano and M. Vink (eds.), *Europeanization: New Research Agendas*, Basingstoke, 2007, pp. 154-67; 159-160.

[9]   This section is based on: G. Voerman, 'De Nederlandse politieke partijen en de Europese integratie', in: K. Aarts and H. van der Kolk (eds.), *Nederlanders en Europa: Het referendum over de Europese grondwet*, Amsterdam, 2005, pp. 44-63.

– they realised that closer European cooperation would contribute to a faster re-covery of an economy severely damaged by the war – while on the other hand, this was because of mounting tensions between the United States (the West) and the Soviet Union (the Eastern bloc). Without exception, the election programmes of the large parties during the 1950s argued for a federalist form of European cooperation, which could be at the expense of national sovereignty to a certain degree. The VVD, however, believed that economic unity – the establishment of a common market – was a prerequisite for the realisation of political unification. The widely supported pro-European outlook was also expressed in the national parliament during this period. The VVD, for example, endorsed the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC), but was concerned that the EEC would become protectionist.

Interest in European cooperation began to fade among most parties due to stagnation in European integration during the 1960s. This did not mean, how-ever, that they renounced their positions. They continued hammering away at a powerful continuation of European integration: economic cooperation had to become closer and lead to supranational political unification. Mere intergovern-mental cooperation, as advocated by France, was definitely inadequate for most Dutch parties. The need to increase democratic parliamentary control, elect the European Parliament directly and expand European cooperation via the accession of other countries was pointed out. This federalist chorus also included the left-wing liberal party D66. After joining the national parliament, this party would emerge as the champion of European integration.

During the 1970s, at the time of 'Eurosclerosis', the major Dutch parties hung onto the need for the democratisation of the European Community by expanding the powers of the European Parliament and for a stronger position for the Euro-pean Commission. Up until the 1990s, the position that Europe had to be formed along federalist lines continued to enjoy broad support. This pro-European har-mony changed due to VVD leader Frits Bolkestein.

At more or less the same time that the VVD plainly stated that its goal was focused 'on a European Union on a federal basis, within which certain state duties are jointly represented that were previously reserved for the exclusive sovereignty of individual member states', party leader Bolkestein openly criticised the idea of a federal Europe because he believed there was no European identity upon which that political project could be based, among others. He wanted to restrict European integration to the internal, liberalised common market and argued that the Netherlands should stand up more strongly for its national interests.[10] Like all

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[10] In December 2005, his fellow party member Gerrit Zalm managed to secure a billion-euro reduction in the Netherlands' annual contribution to the European Union. For Bolkestein's view, see: G. Voerman, 'Een euroscepticus in Brussel? Frits Bolkestein, lid van de Europese Commissie (1999-2004)', in: G. Voerman, B. van den Braak and C. van Baalen (eds.), *De Nederlandse eurocommissarissen*, Amsterdam, 2010, pp. 261-293.

major parties, however, the VVD did approve the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. This was also the case with the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Treaty of Nice. Cracks started appearing in the broad consensus following the enlargement of the European Union with Central and Eastern European countries and Cyprus. During the national election campaign in May 2002, Hans Dijkstal, who succeeded Bolkestein, stated that the Netherlands should possibly use its veto against enlargement if agricultural policy and the structural fund were not reformed before the enlargement. The emergence of the right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn would strengthen the anti-European, nationalist protest in Dutch politics. Whether or not under the influence of his protest, the Christian democrats also placed more emphasis on the national dimension in addition to the VVD.

Despite the greater emphasis on the national element, the majority of established parties in 2005 were in favour of the European constitution. They generally believed that the constitution would make the EU more democratic and decisive and enable terrorism and criminality to be tackled more effectively. D66 was the greatest advocate of the constitution. The VVD had indicated earlier that it would prefer no constitution instead 'of a poor one in that case', but opted in favour of it nevertheless, partly because it incorporated the principle of the free market. There was little sign of any federalist zeal among the VVD: 'our identity remains secure thanks to a clear limitation of European tasks and our parliament's stronger hold on legislation from Brussels', said Jozias van Aartsen, the parliamentary leader of the VVD in the Dutch House of Representatives at the time.

During the referendum on the European constitution in spring 2005, criticism was clearly audible from the populist socialist SP in particular, which targeted the social democrats. The negative result was a shock for government parties and potential government parties, which had supported the constitution without exception, albeit not with equal conviction. It was clear that the broad parliamentary approval for this new round in European integration did not dovetail with support within society. Approximately 85% of parliamentary members supported the European constitution, but roughly 38% of voters who turned up shared that opinion. The obvious euroscepticism put them in an awkward position, but they nevertheless continued supporting European cooperation in elections for the European Parliament in 2009.

Can it be stated now that Dutch political parties supported European cooperation? The answer to this must be affirmative given that an unambiguous pro-European consensus existed among large, potential government parties for decades. These parties were confirmed advocates of far-reaching European cooperation, and appeared to represent the viewpoints and feelings of voters appropriately. Over the past decades, parties had become less outspoken defenders of the 'European' matter. Cracks started appearing in public support for closer

cooperation[11] and the hesitancy of political parties, including the VVD, increased. Potential government parties still advocate cooperation, but believe that this cooperation must be in harmony with the principle of subsidiarity, with the exception of D66. As already mentioned, the rejection of the European Constitution revealed how greatly opinions differed in the national parliament and among the electorate. The difference in opinions between the electorate and the elected probably grew smaller during the following years: studies have revealed at any rate that support for European integration among the Dutch population has remained just as great as prior to the referendum.[12]

Europarty development

A second way to examine what national political parties did to encourage the legitimacy of the European Union involves determining to what extent they contributed to the establishment of European party organisations. In this approach, national political parties begin cooperating in a transnational context in order to ensure the transfer of administrative powers to the European level of a proportionate amount of democratic control. Expanding the powers of the European Parliament can reduce the democratic deficit, but European party formation can also help to this end. As the substantive and strategic agreement with a European party family increases, the party political control function on European level will be fulfilled more effectively – by common parliamentary groups in the European Parliament and an extra-parliamentary organisation for common programme development. The ensuing higher degree of accountability could increase the acceptance of European integration among party members and voters. In addition, a Europarty can take the organisational form of parties at national level, for example because it is based on individual party membership and partially undertakes the nomination itself, and ensures greater interaction between citizens (party members) and 'Europe', and a greater acceptance of the European administrative layer.

To trace transnational cooperation among national political parties in Europe we need to go back to December 1974, when the European Summit of heads of state and government (Paris) decided to hold direct elections at the end of the

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[11] J. Thomassen, 'Nederlanders en Europa. Een bekoelde liefde?', in: K. Aarts and H. van der Kolk (eds.), *Nederlanders en Europa: Het referendum over de Europese grondwet*, Amsterdam, 2005, pp. 64-86.

[12] Support for membership in the Netherlands is also exceptionally high in comparison with other countries, as revealed by research carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) and the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CBP). See: SCP and CPB, *Strategisch Europa. Markten en macht in 2030 en de publieke opinie over de Europese Unie*, Den Haag, 2009, chapter A3; and idem, *Europa's buren. Europees nabuurschapsbeleid en de publieke opinie over de Europese Unie*, Den Haag, 2008, chapter A3.

decade.[13] The expectation that the first direct European elections in 1979 would see the genesis of a political arena at the European level, in which the federations would play a role that was clearly marked and recognisable to the electorate, failed to come true, however. Voter turnout for the first European elections was low, and even lower for the next elections in 1984. Nor did these elections boost the development of the transnational, European federations of national parties in a supranational direction. On the one hand, this had been due to the relative impotence of the European Parliament: it was generally felt that, if the federations wanted to reinforce the strength of their positions, the powers of the Parliament needed to be considerably enlarged. On the other hand, this stagnation was also related to the wide-ranging internal political diversity of the federations, despite the fact that within the EU they tied together parties from the same ideological family in a single organisational unit. National differences had an important effect. The federations' capacity for decisive action was also held back by their organisational weakness and their far-reaching dependence on the parliamentary groups for their funding, staffing and accommodation.

The Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties of the European Community (abbreviated to ELD) was launched in March 1976.[14] One of the founders was the VVD. From the outset, the Federation's internal cohesion suffered as a result of its broad political heterogeneity, with some affiliated parties positioned in the political centre, and others further to the right (like for instance the British and German liberals) – and sometimes belonging to the same country. Although the term 'federation' – as opposed to 'party'– was explicitly chosen, its statutes, congress and executive committee were empowered to adopt (qualified) majority decisions (of two-thirds of the vote).[15] In a formal sense this to some extent curtailed the autonomy of the affiliated parties, and 'there are often cases where a party finds itself in a minority position and outvoted'. In practice, the affiliated parties, all of which set great store by their independence, usually tried to reach consensus.[16] The ELD also had supranational powers in other areas. For example, it was supposed to approve the national candidate lists for the European elections

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[13] This section is based on: G. Voerman, 'From Federation to Party? The Formation of Political Parties in the European Union' in: *Fifty Years European Parliament. Experience and Perspectives*, Athens, 2009, pp. 203-228.

[14] The word 'Democrats' had been added because not all affiliated parties wished to call themselves Liberals. In 1986, after a few parties from Mediterranean countries had joined, the ELD changed its name to Federation of European Liberal, Democratic and Reform Parties (ELDR).

[15] C. Sandström, 'European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party', in: K.M. Johansson and P. Zervakis (eds.), *European Political Parties between Cooperation and Integration*, Baden-Baden, 2002, p. 120.

[16] R. Hrbek, 'Transnational links: the ELD and Liberal Party Group in the European Parliament', in: E.J. Kirchner (ed.), *Liberal Parties in Western Europe*, New York, 1988, pp. 460 and 468. See also: Sandström 'European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party', p. 101.

(although this never in fact happened).[17] The ELD parties were also obliged to work with the jointly drafted programme during the campaign for these elections.

In the early 1990s the federations entered into a new phase, thanks to new opportunities arising out of further widening and deepening of European integration. From 1987 onwards, successive treaties had strengthened the supranational character of the EC, in particular because the European Council of Ministers could increasingly take decisions based on qualified majority voting and because the powers of the European Parliament were extended.[18] This in turn made the federations stronger, as demonstrated by their formal recognition in the Treaty of Maastricht. At their insistence, and for the first time in a European treaty, a formal reference to the transnational European parties was included and their importance acknowledged.[19] On the one hand, the federations needed to promote awareness within the Union (by bringing it closer to voters) and on the other to represent citizens in the European political arena. In the main Europarties, conferences of national party leaders (frequently also heads of government in the case of the christian democrats and social democrats, the liberals were less well off), preceding the meetings of the European Council, were institutionalised. These conferences were also attended by the most prominent political associates within the EU institutions, such as European Commissioners. The creation of this forum of national party leaders was linked to the restriction of the power of national veto within the European political process, which had increased the room for political manoeuvre.[20]

In December 1993, the ELDR replaced the term 'federation' in its name for 'party' and was henceforth called the European Liberal, Democratic and Reform Party (ELDR).[21] Just before that, decision-making procedures had also been modified: instead of requiring qualified majorities, decisions could be taken with ordinary majorities. In principle, this meant that member parties relinquished some autonomy to the European party alliance. According to the Swedish political scientist Sandström, the new procedure was little used at first: 'The newly created party would still use negotiations as the primary method of reaching com-

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17 J. Lodge and V. Herman, *Direct Elections to the European Parliament: a Community Perspective*, London, 1982, p. 207.

18 For a detailed discussion on the role of the European Parliament, see: N. Nugent, *The Government and Politics of the European Union*, London, 2006, chapter 12.

19 The so-called party-article of the Treaty of Maastricht stated: 'Political parties at the European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union.'

20 S. Hix, 'The transnational party federations', in: J. Gaffney (ed.), *Political parties and the European Union* (London 1996) 323; S. Hix and C. Lord, *Political Parties in the European Union*, Basingstoke, 1997, p. 190.

21 D. Hanley, *Beyond the Nation State. Parties in the Era of European Integration*, Houndmills, 2008, p. 119.

mon decisions, emphasising the confederal composition of the ELDR.'[22] Majority decision-making, however, would gradually be used more and more frequently, also on more politically sensitive issues, which, in a way, made the ELDR more supranational.[23] Others, like the former ELDR secretary general Wijsenbeek, are critical. Individual membership, however, proved to be too high a hurdle, as a majority of member parties feared that this would imperil the national party organisations.

In the 1990s, the organisational structure of the ELDR was also modified. A new body was created between the congress and the board: the Council. This body, representing all member parties, convened more frequently than the congress. Owing to the increased competences of the European Parliament and the ELDR's wish to coordinate their member parties' positions prior to European Council meetings, mutual contacts under the ELDR banner greatly increased. The party leader meetings were institutionalised in 1995 and the relationship between the parliamentary group and the Europarty changed formally: the statutes specified that the group should represent the ELDR in the European Parliament, which somewhat restrained the autonomous position of the MEPs. After the 1990s, ties with the member parties were strengthened. The 'national' party secretaries met under the ELDR banner, representatives of the Europarty stepped up their visits to national party meetings, and national parliamentarians visited their group in the European Parliament. The ELDR logo appeared increasingly on member party publications. The debate about the introduction of individual membership also started, this may also be considered a means of improving national party grassroots involvement in the ELDR.

The Europarties were most disappointed that recognition in the Treaty of Maastricht did not extend to financial support. In order to properly carry out their tasks in the European political process (to which the Treaty of Maastricht alluded), it was entirely logical that the Europarties should be given funding – certainly bearing in mind the increasing costs due to the geographical scale on which they were expected to operate. Despite discussions on this matter, the Treaty of Amsterdam, concluded in October 1997, brought no changes. In 2000, the leaders of the five largest Europarties urged the drawing up of a party statute containing a financial regulation. This was prompted in part by growing criticism of the way in which the large Europarties in particular were supported financially and in other ways by their Eurogroups.[24] In 2000, five to ten percent of the 35 million euros in EU funding received by the groups went to the Europarties. The European Parliament itself also pressed for regulations to promote financial transparency.

The Treaty of Nice, concluded in 2001 and coming into effect in 2003, an-

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22 Sandström, 'European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party', p. 102.
23 Ibidem, p. 103.
24 S. Day and J. Shaw, 'The Evolution of Europe's Transnational Political Parties in the Era of European Citizenship', in: T.A. Börzel and R.A. Cichowski (eds.), *The State of the European Union: Law, Politics, and Society*, Oxford, 2003, p. 157.

nounced a statute of political parties at European level. Article 191 reiterated the words of the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties but added: 'The Council… shall lay down the regulations governing political parties at European level and in particular the rules regarding their funding.'[25] It was not until November 2003 – so half a year before the European elections of June 2004 – that the European Parliament and the European Commission established 'the regulations governing political parties and rules regarding their funding at European level'.[26] Europarties wishing to be eligible for EU funding needed to at least have legal personality, and have participated in elections to the European Parliament (or have expressed the intention to do so). Moreover, they had to be represented in supra-local parliamentary bodies in at least a quarter of the member states, or to have gained in at least a quarter of the member states no less than three percent of the votes cast in each of those states during the most recent elections for the European Parliament. Their programmes and actions had to respect the fundamental principles of the European Union ('freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as the constitutional state'). They were obliged to provide a statement of all donations above 500 euro and were not permitted to receive anonymous donations, monies from companies on which the government could exert influence, or sums of more than 12,000 euro. EU funding could only be spent on 'administrative expenses, expenses associated with logistical support, meetings, research, cross-border events, studies, communications and publications'.

The party statute had a major impact on the Europarties, in particular because of the explicit stipulation that 'donations from the budgets of political groups in the European Parliament' were no longer permitted. Because the Europarties could also claim funding from the European Parliament, they now became more autonomous – in a financial sense at least –, although in terms of resources they still lagged far behind the Eurogroups. At the same time, the statute regulated the financial relationship between the Europarties and the member parties. It was stated that the former should not use the granted funding 'to fund, either directly or indirectly, political parties at national level'.

The funding regulation led to the creation of newly funded organisations as in December 2007 'European political foundations' became eligible for financial support (amounting to about 5 million euros). They have to promote debate about Europe and to involve citizens in this dialogue, and are expected to play their part in boosting the representative role of the Europarties. All large Europarties quickly set up a foundation, which usually took the form of a network of member party think tanks. The liberals founded the European Liberal Forum. The foundations assist the Europarties with underpinning and developing policy, which might theoretically improve their position vis-à-vis the Eurogroups.

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25   K.M. Johansson and T. Raunio, 'Regulating Europarties: Cross-Party Coalitions Capitalizing on Incomplete Contracts', *Party Politics*, number 11, 2005.

26   *Official Journal of the European Union*, 15-11-2003, L297/1-4.

In the second half of the 2000s, Europarties pressed ahead with their efforts – outside the campaigns for the European elections – to raise their profile among their supporters within member parties and beyond. The ELDR introduced individual membership (but was not able to translate it into practice), the European Green Party (EGP) registered those who were interested as 'supporters', and the Party of European Socialists (PES), mobilised 'activists' to help prepare for the 2009 elections. Some Europarties organised campaigns in-between elections to reach a broader audience. In 2005 the PES launched the 'Social Europe Initiative', intended as a dialogue between politicians and voters. The EGP began a campaign in the European Union against climate change, using the same slogans and posters in different countries. In doing so, the Europarties not only drew their existence to the attention of a wider audience, but also further shaped their own identities. Publications on individual party histories worked to this same end.[27]

Of course national political parties did not succeed in creating true political parties at European level. Parties have their roots at national and sub-national level, and as long as a European government has not taken shape there will be no European party, at least not with strong supranational elements. Europarties have not been very successful in attracting individual members and voters, although initiatives have been taken to stimulate participation within their organisations. And although in general they have achieved only limited success in carrying out these tasks, Europarties have acquired a broader range of representative roles. This also holds for the ELDR. Nowadays, Europarties have a much bigger focus on processes of common policy-making than in the beginning. They have succeeded somewhat in raising their political profile and improving their ability to set agendas. The advent of affiliated political foundations might reinforce this trend. The Europarties have also proved effective at coordinating the views of party and government leaders to enable them to influence the decision-making processes of the European Council.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine how significant national political parties have been for the acquirement of or increase in the legitimacy of the European Union. In relation to the Netherlands, it can be concluded that the larger political parties fully supported European integration from the outset. Government parties and potential government parties had no problem surrendering part of their sovereignty if doing so would ensure beneficial cooperation in a European context. During the 1990s the VVD revealed another critical position with respect to Europe. Due in part to these reservations and the populist criticism that followed in the new millennium, the parties toned down their supranational intentions considerably and

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[27] J. Ballance and S. Lightfoot, 'The Impact of the Party Regulation on the Organisational Development of Europarties', www.leeds.ac.uk/jmce/dum_papr.htm, pp. 12-13.

started placing more emphasis on national dimensions. Furthermore, it became evident that national parties were unable to form a party at European level that could reduce the democratic deficit substantially. However, it must be noted at the same time that substantive and strategic cooperation between political parties from the same party families is growing.

Political parties can increase the legitimacy of the European Union in the future by strengthening regulatory institutional mechanisms first of all. The Treaty of Lisbon was another step in this direction. A following step would be to give citizens more direct influence. Political parties are the obvious organisations that can enable this. Firstly, parties should permit individual membership of Europarties – insofar as they have not done so already – and stimulate this in practice. Such encouragement has either not or barely occurred up until now. Secondly, greater involvement in European elections could be achieved if not only members of the European Parliament but also the President of the European Commission are elected. The expectation is that this will make voters feel more involved in the setup and functioning of European government. The President of the European Commission no longer receives his mandate from national governments or the European Parliament, but from the electorate. Consequently, this will become an important factor in public opinion. Thirdly, electoral lists for the European Parliament should comprise partly national and partly European candidates from now on. This – in combination with the election of the Commission President – would initiate real discussions about European themes during election campaigns. A further step would entail allowing the outcome of the elections to be disclosed in the legislative and executive process at EU level: a government that relies on a majority in the European Parliament and must be accountable to that parliament. The increased accountability accompanying these reforms will benefit the legitimacy of the European project.