

Central European MEPs as Agents of Two Principals. Party Cohesion in the European Parliament after Enlargement

András Bíró-Nagy

Junior Research Fellow

Center for Social Sciences

Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Hungary

Date of submission: October 16th, 2016

Date of acceptance: October 23rd, 2016

Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of Central European MEPs on party cohesion in the European Parliament. By applying the principal-agent theory, it is also analyzed how loyal are the MEPs of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia to their European political groups and national parties. The empirical research carried out in this study demonstrates that the Central European MEPs have not brought more division to their political groups, but have been loyal members of their European parties. The Central European MEPs have not weakened the cohesion of the EP party groups, but party cohesion was even further strengthened between 2004 and 2014. Cohesion is the strongest in the biggest parliamentary groups. EPP and S&D set the direction for most politicians on most occasions. Clear 'rebel' cases, when national parties as a whole went against their European political groups are not more than 2-3 percent of all votes in the two biggest European political families. National parties have a bigger room of manoeuvre in the smaller political groups. In ECR and GUE-NGL the difference between loyalty to the national party and the European party group is significantly higher than in EPP and S&D.

Keywords: European Parliament, Central European MEPs, party cohesion, voting behavior, legislative studies



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

Corresponding Author: András Bíró-Nagy, Junior Research Fellow

Affiliation: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre for Social Sciences

Address: Országház str. 30, 1014 Budapest, Hungary

e-mail: biro-nagy.andras@tk.mta.hu

Copyright @ 2016, András Bíró-Nagy

European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities - EQPAM, Volume 5, No.4, October 2016, pp. 46-59.

ISSN 2285 – 4916

ISSN-L 2285 - 4916

1. Introduction: MEPs as Agents of Two Principals

Despite the fact that Central European countries have been member states of the European Union for over a decade, the knowledge about the activities of their Members of the European Parliament (MEPs¹) is still very limited both in the academic world and among ordinary citizens. What important topics are MEPs engaged in and how these issues affect citizens often goes without significant media coverage, and it is even more so when it comes to the voting behavior of the representatives and the internal institutional mechanisms of the European Parliament.

The lack of research about the activities of the Central European MEPs is especially regrettable if we take into account the outstandingly intriguing political context in which MEPs work. MEPs are selected by their national parties, which are the ones to send them to represent their values and interests in Brussels and Strasbourg. All representatives are voted for their five-year long mandate in their home countries. Since EP elections are held at the national level, politicians arrive to serve in the European Parliament after being elected in different electoral systems. Therefore, close connections to the domestic politics of their home country is given. Moreover, having a good relationship and regular contacts with the sending party is not only a moral imperative, but it is also the key to re-election and is vital to build a long-term political career in the EP (Hix-Hoyland 2013). For this reason, the party leadership of the sending parties possesses very important power tools which have the potential to exercise serious political influence on the MEPs delegated by them.

On the one hand, there is always a possibility that MEPs get advice from back home regarding what they should do. On the other hand, voting behavior of an MEP might be influenced to a large extent by the pressure coming from their own party group in the European Parliament. The factors behind the influencing potential of a European party group are completely different to that of the national parties. Gail McElroy (2001: 3) argued that "the European Parliament lacks the incentives that are necessary to keep the party groups disciplined". This statement is only partly true. The European Parliament's internal logic differs from that of the national parliaments as it lacks the traditional government-opposition divide due to its special place within the institutional structure of the European Union. Another huge difference is that the party groups of the European Parliament do not have the right to nominate their members. Therefore, European party groups miss the most important tool to exercise pressure over their members: the decisive role in the candidate selection process.

However, there are some more sophisticated instruments at their disposal. Such instruments include the nomination for the most prestigious positions of the EP and within the party groups, and the distribution of positions and policy-based tasks in the committees. Those politicians who harbor long-term ambitions and do not consider Brussels and Strasbourg the quite end of their career have outstanding career-building opportunities in the European Parliament (Verzichelli-Edinger 2005, Bíró-Nagy 2016). An MEP has numerous instruments to build up a strong political/policy profile that is not only helpful in gaining professional reputation but to reach high-level positions within the European party groups and the institutional structure of the EP as well. It is also worth to note that being a parliamentarian in the EP makes it possible that with competent policy work and "defending the national interests" further reputation can be won among the electorate of the sending country. Speeches at the plenary sessions might be also used to influence the domestic political scene. Furthermore, a clear political profile built during the EP years can help (re-)enter domestic politics. This brief summary indicates that adapting to the norms and inner mechanisms of the EP might be also of key importance to the representatives since this strategy might be extremely fruitful regarding their long-term political career goals.

These introductory remarks connect directly to the "principal-agent" approach of Simon Hix and his co-authors (Hix et al. 2007: 133-136), which also provides the theoretical framework to this study. The leading scholars of this field of research regard the EP as an institution where the representatives (agents) have two principals: their

¹ Abbreviations: ALDE - Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; EFD – Europe of Freedom and Democracy; EP – European Parliament; EPP – European People's Party; EPRG - European Parliamentary Research Group; ECR – European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE/NGL – European United Left-Nordic Green Left; MEP – Member of the European Parliament; ODS - Občanská Demokratická Strana (Civic Democratic Party); S&D – Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

national parties and the party groups of the EP. Hix et al. argue that MEPs may get between two fires as they have to take into account both the national and European political dimension during their work. They have to correspond to the wishes of their sending parties (or depending on the personality, to the ideal of standing up for the “national interest”) and follow the political line of their EP party group at the same time.

By an empirical analysis of the voting records, this paper is looking for an answer to the question: which principal is the stronger? Does the national party political embeddedness dominate among the MEPs of the five Central European countries that acceded to the EU together in 2004 (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) or party cohesion at the European level proves to be stronger than the national dimension? Investigating the voting behavior of the MEPs becomes even more important in the light of the growing powers of the European Parliament. Looking at the votes helps better understand the internal dynamics and the major motivations that move party competition as well.

While the European Parliament is still often considered a relatively weak institution, the fact that the EP has the right to amend and block laws, would place this institution among the parliaments with “strong policy-making power” (Mezey 1979: 155). The European Parliament has become a veto player (Tsebelis 2005) in more and more policy fields. As a consequence of the Lisbon Treaty, co-decision is used as the ordinary legislative procedure in more than 40 new fields. This development has given more weight to the decisions of the EP and for this reason it must count with a new wave of interest groups appearing in Brussels. As Wessels (1999) argues, where the EP receives more power, it attracts more attention on behalf of the lobbyists as well. The stronger law-making position might make the MEPs more interesting for the national governments and their sending parties too: the stakes are higher in the EP, it might be worth to influence them more than before. As the European Parliament’s role has become more important in the institutional structure of the European Union, it is also more vital to the European party groups to appear as united voting blocks and secure the majority behind their policy initiatives.

In the first part I investigate what general tendencies can be identified regarding party cohesion in the EP, with a special focus on the first decade after the 2004-enlargement. Then in the second part of the study I analyze how the five Central European countries that entered the European Union in 2004 fit these trends. As 2004-2014 can be considered as a period of political socialization for the MEPs of the new member states, the hypothesis of this study is that the Central European MEPs accepted the rules and the internal procedures of the European Parliament, adapted quickly to them and were loyal members to their political groups from the beginning.

2. Party Cohesion Trends in the European Parliament

In democratic political systems it is not rare that representatives are not always loyal to the official line of their parties. As it is a widely experienced phenomenon at the national level, one could expect to witness this even more so in the European Parliament, since transnational party groups work there (Judge-Earnshaw 2008: 135). In the case of transnational parties cohesion might be undermined by the fact that they do not only consist of different ideological streams but of independently acting national parties who achieve their electoral results on their own right. In theory, the growing powers of the EP might be also a factor against party cohesion. The reason of this is the above mentioned tendency that as the EP becomes more important in the decision-making process of the EU, national governments and parties might be more interested in influencing their MEPs. Taking this into account, we could even suppose that national parties aim for more control over the activities of their representatives and this reflects in the voting records. If the national interest ties them to a standpoint, MEPs might even vote against their own party group in the European Parliament.

There has been serious academic work done in this field in the 1990s (see for example Attina 1990, Quanjet-Wolters 1993, Hix-Lord 1997), however thorough research of voting behavior in the European Parliament got to the centre of the debate only after the establishment of the European Parliamentary Research Group (EPRG) in 1998. EPRG provides a professional platform and maybe even more importantly, a solid financial background for the most prestigious scholars of the European Parliament. Party cohesion is a recurring theme in their studies. Moreover, the EPRG carried out an ambitious research by investigating all roll call votes since 1979. It was first Simon Hix, Abdul Noury and Gerald Roland who published a research paper on the roll call votes of the MEPs in 2002, and later

this was followed by a string of studies within the framework of EPRG. It is also worth to note that four EPRG researchers, Hix and Noury among them, launched an independent website (www.votewatch.eu) that contains a wide range of statistical analysis of the votes carried out in the EP. Thanks to several generous sponsors, Votewatch can work independently from the national governments, the European Parliament and other European institutions.

The EP party cohesion researches conducted by EPRG and Votewatch indicate that the assumption according to which party cohesion has been weakened due to growing powers of the EP and the increased interest on behalf of the national parties, can be rejected. As Hix, Noury and Roland (2007) proved, party cohesion within EP groups has been always stronger than the national cohesion, and this tendency has just become stronger since 1979. While the Agreement index (on a scale between 0 and 1, where 1 is equal to full cohesion) of the three biggest European party groups (European People's Party, the Socialists and the Liberals) was 0.814 in the 1979-1984 term, this cohesion index reached 0.889 in the first half of the 2004-2009 term. When parties from the same country are measured with the same index, a reverse tendency can be experienced. During the first directly elected term national cohesion of the three biggest fractions was 0.667, 25 years later cohesion among parties from the same country was significantly lower, at 0.589. If we look at the Agreement index of the whole EP, the fifth term shows a bit stronger cohesion (0.842) within the party groups than in the first term (0.823). These results offer two conclusions. First, party based voting has been always more dominant than national voting since 1979. Second, party cohesion has become stronger in the last more than three decades. After all, it can be concluded that voting behavior of the MEPs has turned into more "party based" and less "nationalist".

A further important lesson is that in spite of the high levels of the Agreement index, party cohesion in the European Parliament has been weaker than in the national parliaments in Europe, but is somewhat higher than in the US Congress (Hix et al. 2002: 9). The investigation of the roll call votes since 1979 also suggests that party cohesion grew parallel with the powers of the European Parliament. This statement is backed by the fact that the strengthening of party cohesion accelerated after the acceptance of the Amsterdam Treaty (Judge-Earnshaw 2008: 139). This document transferred significant powers to the European Parliament, therefore the inter-institutional dynamics of the European Union started to push the party groups towards the formation of more solid voting blocks.

The natural background of the fact that intra-party mechanisms are more decisive at voting than national political embeddedness is that EP party groups are set up on ideological streams rather than national basis. It would be indeed illogical from the national parties to send the representatives to the European Parliament with a strictly tied mandate. A mandate without the opportunity to decide freely would make little sense in a world where none of the countries possesses enough power to achieve substantial results alone. National co-operation is no guarantee for any policy results – the representatives of the biggest countries can be outnumbered easily by the others. Therefore, a tied mandate would just provide an obstacle for the MEPs to get to the winning side by acting freely in the internal power play of the European Parliament.

Scully (2005) draws the attention to another potential explanatory factor of the strengthening party cohesion: by investigating the "going native" hypothesis, he assumed that institutional socialization plays the most decisive role in voting behavior. The most important research question for Scully was if the parliamentarians in Brussels internalize the local values and attitudes, and as a result they become more loyal to them. Concerning voting behavior this would imply that MEPs act and vote loyally to the policy approaches of their European party group. This research also demonstrated what Hix and his co-authors concluded before, that party based cohesion is stronger than national cohesion, but Scully emphasized that it is not the impact of "going native". Attitudes and values internalized before the EP mandate, and own conviction had much more explanatory power regarding voting behavior.

From the point of view of an MEP it is of key importance how often the majoritarian national opinions do not coincide with the official standpoint of the European party group. If there are such cases regularly, it might cause tensions either within the party group or among the fellow countrymen. Official statistics of the European Parliament show that this scenario is quite rare. As an example it can be mentioned that the majoritarian opinion within the party and the national delegation went in the same way in 90% of the votes between 1999 and 2004 (Judge-Earnshaw 2008: 138).

The statistics shown in this chapter are based on the roll call votes of the last decades. Even the EPRG researchers admit that roll call votes might not provide a totally representative result as not all of the votes are organized according to this method. Despite this fact, Hix et al. (2007: 30) hold that the investigation of roll call votes is an adequate research method as this is how the most important votes happen. Carrubba (2006) accepts that roll call votes are important, however, he expresses concerns regarding this methodology. The core of the critics is that several party groups use roll call votes for strategic purposes, assuming that this format in itself is an incentive to stick to the party's official direction. Following this line of thinking, it cannot be surprising if the statistics reflect high party cohesion index. According to Carrubba, this is a self-fulfilling act: party cohesion is strong, but it is strong exactly because the party did its best to push their MEPs into the same direction. Carrubba questions the most frequent method used to analyze party cohesion, but he does not claim that it would make no sense at all. His conclusion is just that it would be wise to be a bit more careful with the interpretation of roll call votes.

Despite the critics surrounding the roll call votes, it is clear that party cohesion is not independent from policy fields. It does matter what issue is the roll call vote about. By analyzing the vote database of Votewatch about the 2004-2009 and the 2009-2014 terms, there is some evidence to back this statement. As it can be seen in **Table 1**, party cohesion was high (above 0.85) in all groups between 2004-2009, except the Eurosceptic party groups. The Socialist and the Green parliamentary fractions were the most disciplined (0.91), but the Liberals (0.89), the People's Party (0.88) and the United Left (0.85) were also close. Regarding the Eurosceptic party groups, a good level of cohesion was experienced in the Union of European Nations, but in the case of the Independence and Democracy party group, the lack of discipline was obvious (0.47). The Agreement index of the latter was just slightly higher than the data of the non-affiliated MEPs, who did not even work within any organized framework.

In spite of strong cohesion, there were certain differences regarding the nature of co-operation between the three biggest party groups (People's Party, Socialists, Liberals) during the 2004-2009 term. The conservative European People's Party voted especially united (above 0.90) in issues related to international trade, justice and home affairs and fisheries. Cohesion was significantly lower than average (below 0.85) in agriculture, gender issues, budgetary control and internal regulations of the EP. The Party of European Socialists – as the most united party group – had an Agreement index over 0.90 in 12 policy fields, and was almost completely disciplined (over 0.94) in four areas: development, civil liberties, gender issues and budget. The weaker points of the Socialists included only two policy fields: agriculture and the internal regulations of the EP. The Liberals reached at least 0.90 in seven policies, including budgetary control, development and international trade. The Liberals had an Agreement index below 0.85 in two areas: internal market and consumer protection, and similarly to the other two big party groups, in the internal regulations of the EP.

The 2009-2014 term brought even more disciplined party groups. Transnational party groups influenced voting behavior to an even bigger extent than in the previous five years (see **Table 2**). Three out of the seven party groups had an Agreement index above 0.90, close to full cohesion. The Greens voted united in almost all policy areas (overall index: 0.95), but the People's Party (0.93), the Socialists and Democrats (0.92) were also very much disciplined. The Liberals (ALDE, 0.88) and the Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR, 0.87) also showed considerable cohesion. These policies include culture and education for both the People's Party and the Liberals, while besides these two fields the Greens were totally united in transport and gender as well.

Further evidence of the strengthening cohesion in the 2009-2014 term is that the number of those fields where the Agreement index was at least at 0.90 increased significantly. MEPs of the European People's Party reached this level in 16 and the Socialists (S&D) in 18 policy areas, while this high level of cohesion characterized the Greens in all policies, except the internal regulations of the EP. While in 2004-2009 it was a rare phenomenon to have an Agreement Index 0.95 or above, it has become quite frequent in the subsequent five years. It was a growing number of policy fields, in which a certain party group voted almost unanimously in almost all cases throughout five years. EPP had 10 of such 'consensus' policy areas, S&D was at 8, and the Greens, the most united party group of the 2009-2014 period, voted in block in the majority (12) of all policy areas.

Relatively low cohesion (<0.85) practically disappeared within the two biggest party groups. EPP experienced an Agreement Index below 0.85 only in issues related to gender equality. The number of policies where the S&D produced less cohesion was two: agriculture and the internal regulations of the EP were these issues. The

Greens had only one policy area below 0.85 (internal regulations). ALDE reached its lowest levels of cohesion in agriculture and internal regulations, the ECR produced its worst results in the areas where EU spending is the highest (regional development and agriculture) and the radical left GUE-NGL performed poorly in keeping the unity in agriculture, budget and internal regulations of the EP.

From these results it can be concluded that agriculture and the internal regulations are the two fields where party cohesion is the weakest in general. However, it must be stressed that party cohesion in these fields is still not low. It is rather appropriate to talk about a slightly lower party cohesion than in the other policy areas where the leading party groups are extremely disciplined.

3. How Loyal Are the Central European MEPs?

The data shown in the previous chapter demonstrated that the party loyalty of the MEPs have strengthened throughout the first two parliamentary cycles after the accession of the Central European countries. This also implies that the enlargement of the European Union, the appearance of new MEPs of new member states, and in general the fragmentation of the European party groups have not had a negative impact on party cohesion.

The characteristics of the EP as a whole seem to be true in the case of Central European MEPs as well: voting based on European political group affiliation is decisive (Hix et al. 2007, Votewatch 2011, Votewatch 2015). Discipline towards the European party groups was outstanding in these countries (on average it was above 93 percent), with the exception of the Czech MEPs (**Table 3**). The Czech case can be explained with the fact that MEPs from the ODS party did not feel 'comfortable' in ideological terms in the European People's Party. Their members struggled to adapt themselves to the committed pro-European standpoint of EPP, which was reflected in their poor loyalty towards their European party group when it came to the votes (ODS loyalty to EPP was only 77 percent in 2004-2009). This problem was solved in the 2009-2014 term by leaving EPP and joining the Eurosceptic ECR group. This change apparently fitted ODS MEPs more: they voted with ECR in 95% of all votes, which brought the average loyalty of Czech Republic from 82% to 92% (**Table 4**).

Table 1. Cohesion index of the party groups in the European Parliament in all policy areas, July 2004 – June 2009 (between 0 and 1, full cohesion=1) (see APPENDIX)

Table 2. Cohesion index of the party groups in the European Parliament in all policy areas, July 2009 – April 2014 (between 0 and 1, full cohesion=1) (see APPENDIX)

MEPs of the four other Central European countries followed the standpoints of their European political groups overwhelmingly. Loyalty of Hungarian, Polish, Slovakian and Slovenian MEPs was all above 95%.

Table 3. Loyalty to EP political groups, by countries, 2004-2009

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia	Slovenia	Total
Loyalty to European group	82.52%	96.19%	95.19%	98.08%	- (96.93%)	93.36%

Source: www.votewatch.eu

Note: Only those national groups are considered in the statistics of Votewatch that were made up of at least 5 MEPs. For Slovenia I calculated the average of individual loyalty to the European political group.

Table 4 shows that loyalty to the European political group remained strong in the 2009-2014 term. The loyalty of Polish and Slovakian MEPs somewhat decreased compared to the previous five years, but the change is

not significant. In general, it can be stated that the Central European MEPs are loyal members of their European political families. They rarely behave as 'rebels' and vote against the official European party line. The strong loyalty of each Central European country obviously means that the aggregate loyalty index of the five countries is also high: Central European MEPs voted in 92.68% of all votes with their European parties in the 2009-2014 term. This data indicates that the Central European MEPs are definitely not acting as destabilizers in their groups, but rather strengthen party cohesion.

Table 4. Loyalty to EP political groups, by countries, 2009-2014

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia	Slovenia	Total
National average	91.99%	95.38%	91.02%	93.91%	96.99%	92.68%
Number of relevant MEPs	22	19	50	13	7	111

Source: Collected and calculated by the author based on the data of www.votewatch.eu

Note: Non-affiliated MEPs (altogether 3 MEPs) are left out from the calculations.

The investigation of the Central European MEPs also proves that MEPs of the bigger parliamentary groups tend to vote more in line with the standpoints of their party (**Table 5**). In 2009-2014, only three Central European MEPs were members of the third most influential fraction (ALDE), but they voted in the same way the most (95.8%). The 25 Socialist MEPs (S&D was the second biggest group in the EP in 2009-2014) of the five countries also tended to vote nearly always with the majority of their party (95.79%). The most Central European MEPs – 53 people – belonged to the European People's Party and they also vote in a highly disciplined way (95.06%). The fact that almost half of the Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) came from Central European countries (mainly from Poland and the Czech Republic) was an interesting indicator of the region's political landscape. The 21 ECR MEPs of the Central European region were also quite loyal (89.30%). Beyond these four parliamentary groups, five men strong EFD (73.18%), the four Czech communist MEPs (GUE/NGL, 81.37%), and the three non-affiliated MEPs of the Hungarian radical right Jobbik party must be mentioned, to have a full picture of the Central European region's representatives between 2009 and 2014.

Table 5. Central European MEPs' loyalty to EP political groups, by political groups, 2009-2014

	EPP	S&D	ECR	EFD	GUE/NGL	ALDE	Total
Party average	95,06%	95,79%	89,30%	73,18%	81,37%	95,8%	92,68%
Number of relevant MEPs	53	25	21	5	4	3	111

Source: Collected and calculated by the author based on the data of www.votewatch.eu

Note: Non-affiliated MEPs (altogether 3 MEPs) are left out from the calculations.

The data available on loyalty to national party of the Central European MEPs (**Table 6**) indicate that those politicians who represent the same national party in the EP vote in the same way even more frequently. It is rather exceptional to find votes when there would be a split between MEPs of the same national party. In the 2009-2014 term this practically did not happen among MEPs from Slovakia and Slovenia (the loyalty to the national parties was above 99 percent in both countries), but the loyalty rate was also very high in the cases of Czech, Hungarian and Polish MEPs (96-97 percent).

Table 6. Loyalty to national party, by countries, 2009-2014

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia	Slovenia	Total
National average	96,22%	97,07%	97,36%	99,27%	99,52%	97,36%
Number of relevant MEPs	20	21	47	11	4	103

Source: Collected and calculated by the author based on the data of www.votewatch.eu

Note: Those MEPs who represent their national parties alone in the EP (altogether 11 MEPs) are left out from the calculations.

There are no big differences regarding loyalty to the national party on ideological grounds either (**Table 7**). National parties of all European political groups are very cohesive. However, although the difference is slight, those national parties that send MEPs to the two biggest European political groups (EPP and S&D) are the most disciplined. In the EPP and S&D there is not much room of maneuver for the national parties as they follow the official line in 95-96 percent of the votes. However, it must be added that cohesion within the national parties exist in roughly half of the 'rebel' votes (in cases when there is disagreement between the European group and the national group). This is reflected in the fact that the loyalty to national party is 2-3 percentage points higher than the loyalty to the EPP and S&D.

Table 7. Loyalty to national party, by EP party groups, 2009-2014

	EPP	S&D	ECR	GUE/NGL	Non-affiliated	Total
National average	98,07%	97,64%	96,75%	95,32%	90,92	97,36%
Number of relevant MEPs	50	23	23	4	3	103

Source: Collected and calculated by the author based on the data of www.votewatch.eu

Note: Those MEPs who represent their national parties alone in the EP (altogether 11 MEPs) are left out from the calculations. As ALDE members of Central Europe all belong to this category, ALDE group is left out from the calculations.

Based on the data presented in this chapter, it can be stated that the voting behavior of Central European MEPs reflects a strong party politics character. The biggest European party families are the most efficient in enforcing party discipline. However, it is important to underline that national party cohesion can be detected in votes when the national party line differs from the agreed political direction of the European political group as well. National political groups have a bigger room of maneuver in the smaller political groups. In ECR and GUE-NGL the difference between loyalty to the national party and the European party group is significantly higher (7 and 14 points, respectively in 2009-2014) than in EPP and S&D. This means that those politicians who represent the same national party vote together even in situations when the pressure to follow the European official line is not as strong as in the cases of the biggest and most influential political groups.

4. Conclusion

The empirical research carried out in this paper demonstrate that the MEPs of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia have not brought more division in the European Parliament to their political groups, but have been loyal members of their European parties. Regarding the two principals of the MEPs, at first sight it might appear as if loyalty to the national party would be the most important factor behind voting patterns. While in the case of Central European MEPs this seems to be true for politicians who are members of smaller – and as a consequence, less influential – European political groups (such as ECR, GUE-NGL, EFD), the data about the two leading parties (EPP and S&D) suggest that the overall picture might be more complex. Loyalty to the EPP and S&D official line was 95-96 percent in 2009-2014, which means that Central European MEPs of very different national parties followed the same direction, almost always. In these cases loyalty to the national party was equal to being loyal to the European

political group. The indexes of "loyalty to the national party" were high because most parties as a whole voted together with their European party. Therefore it would be most probably wrong to conclude that loyalty to national party was more important than loyalty to the European political group, just because for EPP and S&D members loyalty to national party indexes were slightly higher than loyalty to European party data. A more realistic scenario is that the compromises reached in EPP and S&D before the vote set the direction for most politicians on most occasions. Clear 'rebel' cases, when national parties as a whole went against their European political groups are not more than 2-3 percent of all votes in the two biggest European political families.

Party cohesion in the EP was already very strong during the 2004-2009 term. This tendency went even further in the 2009-2014 term. The fact, that we could find policy fields in which almost all votes of the last five years supported the official party standpoint in several political groups, is an obvious sign of that. Cohesion is the strongest in the biggest parliamentary fractions. This is not surprising since these are the parties that have the chance to achieve substantial policy results – in case, they can stand up for an issue together.

It is important to stress that the Central European member states that joined the EU in 2004 and their MEPs have not weakened the cohesion of the EP party groups. Party cohesion was even further strengthened after that the Central European MEPs started to work in Brussels and Strasbourg. They are indeed loyal to their European party groups: in the first term after the accession they voted 93, then between 2009-2014 92 percent of the total votes in accordance with their European political groups. Therefore, we can conclude that the new Central European member states not only did not bring more nationalism to the European Parliament, but they rather contributed to an EP that is even more based on party politics.

Party discipline has become so strong in the most influential European political groups that voting behavior can no longer be regarded as a relevant indicator of different political roles among MEPs. Party affiliation explains voting behavior to such an extent that it might be needed to rather look at other forms of activities inside and outside the EP to identify what individual strategies, political roles MEPs have. It is reasonable to assume that different approaches to representation might be better reflected in what other activities MEPs spend their time and energy on (drafting reports, amending reports, plenary speeches, co-operation with other EU institutions, connection with national party and media, etc.).

The roots of the party cohesion strengthening process can be found in the growing institutional powers of the European Parliament. Due to this general trend, nowadays the stakes are much higher for both the national governments and the party groups concerning what decisions are made in the EP. While national unity in itself, without the support of several other countries has absolutely no chance to succeed with any initiatives, occasional, issue-based coalitions of the biggest EP party groups possess a real opportunity to form a working majority. The "grand coalition" is one of the most interesting phenomena of the everyday political life in the EP. The reason behind the frequent co-operation of the strongest party groups is that the European Parliament has to carry its point in the institutional triangle of the EU. Stronger cohesion within and between party groups might be turned into political capital in the struggle with the European Commission and the European Council. As a consequence, building strong voting block is not a goal in itself but has become a vital tool in European politics, and the Central European MEPs have been disciplined members in this institutional power game.

References

- Attina, Fulvio (1990): The Voting Behaviour of the European Parliament Members and the Problem of Europarties. In: European Journal of Political Research, 1990/3 pp. 557-579.
- Bíró-Nagy, András (2016): Central European MEPs and their roles. Behavioral strategies in the European Parliament. In: World Political Science, 12(1), pp. 147-174.
- Carrubba, Cliff (2006): Off the Record: Unrecorded Legislative Votes, Selection Bias and Roll-Call Vote Analysis. In: British Journal of Political Science, 2006/4, pp. 691-704.
- Hix, Simon – Lord, Christopher (1997): Political Parties in the European Union. London, MacMillan.
- Hix, Simon – Noury, Abdul – Roland, Gerald (2002): A 'Normal' Parliament? Party Cohesion and Competition in the European Parliament, 1979-2001. EPRG Working Paper, No. 9.

- Hix, Simon – Noury, Abdul – Roland, Gerald (2007): Democratic Politics in the European Parliament. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hix, Simon and Høyland, Bjørn (2013): Empowerment of the European Parliament. Annual Review of Political Science, 16 (1). pp. 171-189.
- Judge, David – Earnshaw David (2008): The European Parliament. Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.
- McElroy, Gail (2001): Committees and Party Cohesion in the European Parliament, EPRG Working Paper, No. 8.
- Mezey, Michael (1979): Classifying Legislatures. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Quanjet, Marcel –Wolters, Menno (1993): Growing Cohesion in the European Parliament. ECPR Papers, Leiden.
- Scully, Roger (2005): Becoming Europeans? Attitudes, Roles and Socialization in the European Parliament. Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tsebelis, George (2005): Veto Players and Law Production. In: Döring, Herbert – Hallerberg, Mark: Patterns of Parliamentary Behaviour, pp. 169-199. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Verzichelli, Luca – Edinger, Michael (2005) "A critical juncture? The 2004 European elections and the making of a Supranational elite", Journal of Legislative Studies, 11 (2), pp. 254-74.
- Votewatch (2011): Voting in the 2009-2014 European Parliament: How do MEPs Vote after Lisbon?
http://www.votewatch.eu/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/votewatch_report_voting_behavior_26_january_beta.pdf
- Votewatch (2015): Who holds the power in the new European Parliament? And why? -
<http://www.votewatch.eu/blog/press-release-who-holds-the-power-in-the-new-european-parliament-and-why/>
- Wessels, Bernhard (1999): European Parliament and Interest Groups. In: Katz, Richard – Wessels, Bernhard: The European Parliament, the National Parliaments and European Integration, pp. 105-128. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Open Access

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.