

Strategic leadership in the EU multilevel parliamentary field:

The EPP Group's Erasmus Programme

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Abstract:

This article, for the first time, analyses vertical networking among parliamentary groups and elected politicians from the same Europarty in the EU. It explores how, concerned about its growing ideological diversity, political fragmentation and recent *sovereigniste* tendencies, the European People's Party Group in the European Parliament has sought to exercise strategic leadership within the EU multilevel parliamentary field by systematizing its cooperation with younger national MPs. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach including document analysis, elite interviews, and a participant survey, the article traces the origins, motivations, and implementation since 2016 of the EPP Group's unique Erasmus Programme for visits by such national MPs to Brussels. It shows that participation enhanced the MPs' knowledge about the EPP Group, the EP, and the EU. It also created new contacts between them and the EPP Group and other EP actors, and it contributed somewhat to legitimising the EPP Group's role for national politics. It remains to be seen, however, whether increased vertical parliamentary networking is both sustainable, not ephemeral, and transnational, not national – long-term effects that could only be traced with the help of a longitudinal research design.

Keywords: European Parliament, European People's Party Group, European Union, Multilevel Parliamentary Field, Networks, Strategic Leadership

Political groups in the European Parliament (EP) seek to exercise strategic leadership in different ways. The pro-integration groups from the centre-left to the centre-right have normally done so by shaping intra-parliamentary opinion formation and decision-making (see e.g. Roger and Winzen 2015) and coordinating the EP position in inter-institutional relations, such as with the Commission and the Council in the trilogue, the informal tripartite meetings on legislative proposals (see e.g. Brandsma and Hoppe 2021). In this way the groups have worked hard to expand their and the EP's role in EU level politics and policymaking under the conditions of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty with the transformation from co-decision to the ordinary legislative procedure.

More recently, however, groups in the pro-integration centrist majority in the EP have perceived a growing need to extend their strategic leadership beyond EU level politics and policymaking. They now also seek to exercise greater influence on the EU's multilevel parliamentary field (Crum and Fossum 2009). One of their aims is to address a growing gap in party politics between the EU and national levels, which could threaten the Europarties' vertical cohesion and the EP groups' efficacy in shaping EU politics and policymaking.

Using a mixed methods approach, this article explores how the European People's Party (EPP) Group is actively trying to reduce this gap. It is arguably the most likely case in the EP for studying the changing multilevel relationship among parliamentary groups of the same Europarty. Due to its central position in EP and EU politics and policymaking, it has the most to lose from further fragmentation and even greater multilevel competition. Moreover, its electoral appeal can suffer from excessive ideological fragmentation and its connection with populist tendencies associated with heavily nationalist rhetoric and democratic backsliding.

To analyse and assess the EPP Group's strategy, this article focusses in-depth on its Erasmus Programme for young national MPs from EPP-affiliated parliamentary parties under the age of 40 created in 2016. While individual MEPs and groups can liaise and have liaised with

national MPs and groups in different ways in the past, the EPP Group is the first to have taken a *strategic* initiative to *systematize* cooperation between itself and national MPs from the same Europarty. It hopes that the new programme will help socialize national MPs into more ‘European’ ways of thinking and doing politics at the national level so that they will help legitimize the EU in the eyes of their citizens (Kröger and Bellamy 2016). Moreover, the EPP Group reckons that the programme will make a long-term contribution to retaining sufficient ideological cohesion across the different levels and safeguarding the EPP Group’s own institutional power by creating lasting vertical parliamentary networks.

For the moment, the EPP remains the largest group in the EP. However, it is increasingly politically fragmented and lacking ideological cohesion. Measured in institutional terms (Bardi 2020, 285-98) the Group has become much more diverse following EU enlargements. Since 2019 the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) as the largest national delegation only has 16% of the Group’s MEPs. Although its influence measured in terms of its institutional relevance is much higher, at nearly 25% (Bardi 2020, 289), it has become far more difficult for the centre-right German delegation to provide internal leadership.

At the same time, the EPP Group has also become ideologically far more heterogeneous. It has always been quite diverse in terms of socio-economic policy preferences. However, until the Lisbon Treaty the EPP Group exercised consistent political leadership in the process of EU constitutionalisation (Kaiser 2020; Kaiser 2018, Van Hecke 2012; Johansson 2002). Support for a federal Europe of sorts was, and still is up to a point, a core tenet of its political programme and narrative, including routine references to Christian Democratic ‘founding fathers’ (Kaiser 2007).

During subsequent EU enlargements the EPP Group co-opted conservative rather than Christian Democratic parties with often more intergovernmental preferences, however. The

EU's eastern enlargement led the EPP Group to incorporate some parties like the Hungarian Fidesz, which have turned increasingly populist-nationalist over time. The growing internal fault-lines over the future of the EU between broadly federalist and more intergovernmental or even *sovereigniste* approaches came to a head during the heated controversy over Article 7 and the Multiannual Financial Framework at the end of 2020. At the start of March 2021, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán finally withdrew the Fidesz MEPs from the EPP Group, a step that decreased its voting power in the EP without fully restoring its ideological cohesion on constitutional issues.

This recent crisis in the EPP Group, crucially, is not limited to the issues of Fidesz or the constitutional future of the EU. It extends much more broadly to relations in the EU as a multilevel parliamentary field between the EPP Group and EPP-affiliated parliamentary groups at the national level. In the past, the groups at the EU and national levels had regular, but loose contacts. They operated within what they understood and treated as distinctive parliamentary levels with delineated powers. More recently, however, this relationship has become more competitive and conflictual. Groups at the national level, like national parliaments as collective actors (Auel and Neuhold 2017; Sprungk 2016), are fighting back to defend their powers and advance their own policy preferences (Raunio and Hix 2000).

Several factors appear to account for the more competitive and conflictual relationship. One is the growth over time of EP competences and associated informal powers of the centrist groups (Rittberger 2005). EPP-affiliated national parliamentary groups initially supported the acquisition of legislative and other competences by the EP to combat the EU's democratic deficit. They have increasingly realized, however, that these limit their own competences and role. Another factor seems to be different varieties of renationalization of the programmes and narratives of centre-right parties and more strikingly, changing domestic political rhetoric about alleged failures of 'Brussels' under electoral pressure from the Eurosceptic far right

(Mudde 2019; Vasilopoulou 2017). Such changes may well contribute to processes of de-Europeanisation in the centre of EU politics and policymaking instead of on its margins only, which is still the dominant focus in the literature on Euroscepticism and democratic backsliding (Lorenz and Anders 2021; Stoyanov and Kostadinova 2021).

To explore how the EPP Group tries to exercise strategic leadership in the EU as a multi-level parliamentary field, the article uses a mixed-methods approach to analyse the Erasmus Programme's motivations, structure, and implementation. It then tries to determine the programme's effects in terms of the participating MPs' self-reported knowledge about the EPP Group, the EP, and the EU, and their networking practices. In this way, the article makes a crucial initial empirical contribution to understanding vertical cooperation and competition among parliamentary groups of the same Europarty in the EU.

The first section develops the concepts of multilevel parliamentary field and strategic leadership, and how they can be employed to understanding vertical cooperation and competition among parliamentary groups in such a setting. It also introduces the methods and data as well as their limitations. The second section analyses the EPP Group's motivations for starting the Erasmus Programme in 2016, as well as its key objectives. The third section explores how it has been implemented, and the fourth analyses the survey data about the experience and views of participating national MPs. The conclusion then discusses what the programme tells us about the diversification of the roles of EP groups beyond EU politics and policymaking. Taking the findings of this empirical research as a starting point, it advocates a broader comparative and longitudinal approach to understanding the multilevel nature of parliamentary politics in the EU, which is sorely lacking in the literature.

Theory, methods, and data

Most literature about multilevel parliamentary cooperation in the EU focusses on formal institutional mechanisms. This includes the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) originally created in November 1989 to enhance parliamentary input into the process of treaty reform (Auel and Neuhold 2017; Lupo and Fasone 2016). Alternatively, Crum and Fossum (2009) adopt a strongly normative perspective on how parliaments in the EU multilevel polity can improve the democratic quality of politics and policymaking.

Paradoxically, much research on political parties at EU level has concentrated on Europarties (e.g. Chrysogelos 2021; Poguntke *et al.* 2007). Literature on their affiliated EP groups in contrast remains scarce. The first monographic study of any EP group has analysed the EPP Group (Bardi *et al.* 2020) but it entirely ignores relations with EPP-affiliated national groups. More generally, research on EP groups has tended to focus on their legislative role and macro-level power relations inside the EP including group cohesion, committee work, and voting patterns (see e.g. Roger and Winzen 2015; McElroy and Benoit 2010). More recently, some scholars have become interested in other emergent roles of EP groups, but they have mostly focussed on the virulent issue of how the centrist pro-integration groups maintain and handle the cordon sanitaire against the far right (e.g. Kantola and Miller 2021; Ripoll Servent 2019).

At the same time, nationally comparative studies have explored similarities and differences between attitudes to ‘Europe’ among national MPs (Kinski 2021). Wonka and Haunss (2020) have measured German national MPs’ information sourcing in EU policy matters, but without systematically exploring their links to MEPs of the same national party or EP group. Finally, studies of political socialisation in EU institutional contexts have analysed and disagreed over socialisation effects, but only in relation to MEPs and officials in EU institutions (Neuhold and Högenauer 2016; Lewis 2005; Scully 2005; Abèles 1992).

This article draws on the concept of the EU as a multilevel parliamentary field (Crum and Fossum 2009, building on Maurer 2002) as a heuristic device for exploring the emerging role of EP groups in maintaining sufficient vertical cohesion among groups at the EU and national levels. This concept has two key advantages for the analysis of vertical relations among political groups. The first is that the EU is ‘more disaggregated than a full-fledged EU-federal representative system’ (Crum and Fossum 2009: 261) – a notion shared by the governance and network literature about the EU. In this perspective, it is not surprising that the political groups at each level in such a large and diverse polity as the EU are internally fragmented. Their multilevel cooperation across the EU, the national and regional levels is often ad hoc and challenging to coordinate and intensify due to different institutional roles and demands and diverging pressures such as competitive selection and legitimation processes.

The second advantage of the concept of multilevel parliamentary field as a heuristic device is its interest following Bourdieu, in contestation and power relations within the field. This is crucial for explaining why the EPP Group identified relations with national level MPs and parliamentary groups as more competitive and conflictual in the first place, and why it has devised the Erasmus Programme as a tool for reasserting its own ideological and policy leadership role at EU level in the longer term.

At the same time, the concept of multilevel parliamentary field in line with Bourdieu as well as organizational sociologists like Powell and DiMaggio (1991) is a heavily structuralist approach that neglects the agency of, in this case, parliamentary groups and individual MEPs who are involved in cooperation and competition across the levels. As decision-making in the EU is highly diffused, political leadership appears to be scarce. With some exceptions (e.g. Tömmel and Verdun 2017), it has hardly been researched, and where it has been, then mainly in relation to Commission presidents (Tömmel 2013) or the influence of EP actors on the trilogue (e.g. Brandsma and Hoppe 2021).

Collectively or individually, however, the EP groups and individual MEPs can also exercise political leadership by adopting a *strategic* approach to vertical cooperation that is cognisant of the complex multilevel institutional environment in which they operate (Elgie 2015, 191) and which goes beyond ad hoc contacts over policy issues like trade treaties (Meissner and Rosén 2021). The Erasmus Programme in fact constitutes an excellent example of how MEPs and Group officials have colluded to convince the group leadership to devote significant financial and manpower resources to a particular vertical cooperation initiative in support of quite long-term goals despite the heavy pressures of day-to-day legislative politics.

To analyse how the EPP Group is trying to exert strategic leadership in the multilevel parliamentary field, the article uses a mixed methods approach. Much of the work that focusses on the EP and the political groups draws on quantitative methods only, to measure institutional power or voting cohesion, for example. More recently, some authors have employed qualitative methods to explore how actors in the EP exercise power at the micro level and in informal contexts (e.g. Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019; Brack 2018). This article tries to make the most of the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the EPP Group's Erasmus Programme, its motivations, scope, implementation, and potential impact.

During the first round of the programme from 2016-19 the EPP Group invited 29 national MPs from 13 member-states on stays of 3.5 days in Brussels. The programme was continued after the 2019 EP elections, with four additional MPs visiting until March 2020, when it was suspended temporarily due to the Covid-19 pandemic and repeated lockdowns. To start, we analysed comprehensive statistical data about the programme participants. This data encompassed information about their nationality, age, gender, and other aspects. We also analysed the visit programmes for all trips to Brussels undertaken by the 29 MPs.

Additionally, to explore the motivations behind the Erasmus Programme, we conducted four elite interviews with influential decision-makers: two MEPs and two senior EPP Group officials, all of whom have played a key role in setting up and running the programme. Tom Vandenkendelaere, a Flemish MEP from 2014-19 and again since 2021, was Chair of the EPP's Young Member Network (YMN) which at the time of writing comprised some 30 MEPs and 350 national MPs from EPP-affiliated parties under the age of 40. In this role, he initiated and was responsible for the programme between 2016 and 2019. Before entering the EP, Vandenkendelaere had been a Vice-President of the Youth of the EPP.

When Vandenkendelaere was not re-elected to the EP in 2019, Eva Maydell from the Bulgarian GERB took over his role as YMN Chair and Erasmus Programme lead. First elected to the EP aged 28 in 2014, she seemed the 'natural choice' to succeed Vandenkendelaere (Interview), as she had already acted as YMN Vice-Chair. Moreover, she had extensive experience with transnational networking, although in a cross-party organisation: in 2017, Maydell was elected the first female and Eastern European President of the European Movement International (European Movement 2017).

Alongside the two MEPs in charge of the programme, we conducted interviews with two senior EPP Group officials. The first is its longest serving secretary-general from 2007 to 2020, Martin Kamp, who served under EPP Group leaders Joseph Daul and Manfred Weber. The second is Beatrice Scarascia-Mugnozza, who was responsible for relations with national parliaments and in charge of the programme's administrative implementation, before – like Kamp – retiring in 2020.

To gauge the experience of the participants and their views of the programme, we conceived and disseminated a survey with 20 semi-structured questions to all 29 MPs during 2019-20. Whereas the sample size was inevitably relatively small, the return rate was 58% (17 of 29 national MPs), which is exceptionally high for this type of survey among elected politicians.

While subjective, personal perceptions shape behaviour immensely, so that analysing them can provide insights about informal aspects of programme participation and its aftermath (Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín 2019; Erikson and Josefsson 2018: 2). As the programme relies heavily on snowballing and recruitment through former participants, assessing participant perceptions is also intimately linked to the future trajectory of the initiative.

The survey explored participant motivations for signing up for the programme. It also examined participant perceptions of activities undertaken during their visit to Brussels. It investigated networking effects through self-assessment questions of the participants' contact frequency with EPP stakeholders and others in the EP as well as their familiarity with the EU and EP structures and processes, both before and after their visits. The survey also asked participants whether they were more likely to run for election as MEP after their participation to assess potential effects on personal career aspirations. It then enquired about overall participant satisfaction and possible improvements to the programme with the option of additional comments. In conjunction with the document analysis and the first set of elite interviews, the survey results allow us to draw tentative conclusions about the perceptions and assessments by EPP Group MEPs and officials as well as the participating MPs, of the first programme phase and its potential impact.

Forming networks and socialising national MPs: motivations

The EPP Group has always had some relations with national EPP-affiliated parliamentary groups. It normally organises a summit of group chairmen twice a year. Contacts at the level of secretary-generals and staff have been limited, however (Interview Kamp). In response to these low levels of communication and cooperation, one of the EPP Group's Vice-Chairs was

charged with coordinating contacts, with a small service and team in the secretariat headed by Scarascia-Mugnozza from 2007 to 2020 (Interview Kamp).

At the level of young MEPs and national MPs under the age of 40, the YMN had organised occasional study days or half-days before 2016. However, of the roughly 30 MEPs under the age of 40 only about eight to ten regularly participated in such YMN events. Despite the 350 eligible MPs, only twenty to thirty regularly engaged in activities with their counterparts in the EP (Interview Scarascia-Mugnozza). According to Kamp (Interview), most younger MEPs are preoccupied with their EP and national party work. They might feel that engagement with MPs from member-states other than their own ‘does not bring them so much’. At the same time, many national MPs are ‘only interested in their backyard’ and ‘do not think of the European level’ which is ‘still looked at as second order politics’ (Interview Vandenkendelaere).

In this situation, Weber supported the Erasmus Programme as one of several proposed options for intensifying cooperation with EPP-affiliated national groups and individual MPs after he had taken over as EPP Group chairman in 2014 (Interview Vandenkendelaere). The programme wants to give MPs the opportunity to ‘discover the work of their young MEP colleagues’ and give them a ‘unique experience of the parliamentary activity of the EPP Group’ (EPP Group 2019). Its aim is to ‘to build a network of parliamentarians that know each other and have regular contact with each other’ (Interview Vandenkendelaere) to have impact on EU and national politics when they have reached positions of power and influence. The programme’s particular objective was, and still is, to reach out to national MPs who are not already active in the YMN and who might be less knowledgeable about the EU to begin with (Interview Vandenkendelaere).

The interviews reveal four concrete motivations for setting up the Erasmus Programme. The first is to increase knowledge about the EPP Group, the EP, and the EU among national MPs

from EPP-affiliated parties to facilitate cooperation. According to Maydell (Interview) such knowledge is (even) lower among many MPs from newer member-states. Her predecessor Vandenkendelaere (Interview) also observes a lack of knowledge among MPs in founding member-states like Belgium, however. In his experience, many MPs ‘no longer understand the link between their work and the European Union’. As Kamp (Interview) states, lack of knowledge and interest also prevails in parliaments of larger founding member-states like Germany where it can nowadays result from the belief that ‘they are a hegemonic power’. These EPP Group concerns thus relate to broader processes of de-Europeanization which go beyond democratic backsliding in East-Central European member-states.

The second motivation consists of the hope that the programme can help legitimize the role and powers of the EP in the eyes of national MPs. As Kamp (Interview) says, Eurosceptic parties on the right like Law & Justice in Poland and Lega in Italy aggressively articulate resentment against the EP as having too much power. However, the notion that national parliaments are left with ‘rubber-stamping’ directives is more widespread also in EPP parties. National MPs increasingly see the EP as a competitor in a multilevel fight over influence. Highlighting the phenomenon of greater political contestation across the levels in the EU, Kamp argues that it is essential for the EP to have allies in national parliaments ‘to protect us’ from governments seeking to marginalise the EP in EU politics and policymaking (Interview Kamp).

Creating effective vertical cooperation and networks among parliamentarians from EPP-affiliated parties constitutes the third motivation. The YMN has concrete positive experience with vertical networking as in the case of the Pablo Casado, who took part in several YMN events before becoming leader of the Spanish Partido Popular in 2018 (Interviews Maydell, Kamp). The Group’s hope is to systematise its networking with the help of the Erasmus

Programme to have sympathetic interlocutors among the ‘next-generation European politicians’ from EPP-affiliated parties (Interview Maydell).

Lastly, with its Erasmus Programme the EPP Group is also seeking to counter tendencies of ‘renationalisation’ (Interview Scarascia-Mugnozza) within EPP-affiliated national parties. Vandenkendelaere (Interview) observes a trend towards ‘more conservative, even populist’ behaviour and policies in many parties. Maydell (Interview) reports her ‘struggles with my own party’ in Bulgaria, which in fact led a coalition government between 2017 and 2021 with the aggressively populist-nationalist electoral alliance United Patriots (Stoyanov and Kostadinova 2021). All interviewees refer to the strong pull of nationalist and Eurosceptic parties to the right of EPP parties at the national level, which has induced a shift in narratives about the EU used by national-level EPP politicians. Many of them now frequently criticise European initiatives as well as EU institutions in terms that are reminiscent of far-right parties (Interview Maydell), something that has recently been conceptualized as forms of strategic rhetorical or electoral Euroscepticism (Heinze 2017). The Erasmus Programme, or so the EPP Group hopes, could help counter this trend and give MPs the tools to ‘be emotional’ when supporting the EU in domestic politics (Interview Maydell). In this way, the programme could contribute to the European socialisation of national EPP-affiliated politicians.

Meeting in Brussels: implementation

When it first devised the new programme, the EPP Group used a regularly updated YMN database to send out generic email invitations to national MPs from EPP-affiliated parliamentary parties. This strategy proved ineffective, however (Interview Scarascia-Mugnozza). The EPP Group as a result switched its outreach strategy to the use of a traditional printed flyer (e.g. EPP Group 2018). It also addressed the heads of the national

delegations to identify suitable national MPs who subsequently received personalised invitations (Interview Scarascia-Mugnozza). Since then, the EPP Group has relied on this process and a snowballing effect via participating MPs (Interview Vandenkendelaere).

When the programme first ran in 2016, it recruited six national MPs who came to Brussels on individualised visits. This number went up to nine in 2017 and twelve in 2018. In 2019, only two more MPs participated as the EP was reducing its business in advance of the European elections in May 2019. Of these 29 participants, ten were female and 19 were male so that the proportion of female MPs (34%) was nearly in line with their share of YMN members (36%). To facilitate participation from some countries, the EPP Group invited 5 MPs between the age of 40 and 44. The youngest participant was 28 years old and the average age 37.

The 29 MPs came from 13 member-states. The largest number of participants in absolute terms came from Spain (4) followed by Poland, Ireland, and Lithuania (3) as well as Germany, Romania, Belgium, Croatia, Slovenia, and Malta (2), with one participant each from France, Sweden, Finland, and Greece (EPP Group 2019). Greater participation from some countries can be explained at least in part with the snowballing effect (Interview Vandenkendelaere). At the same time, the respective national groups were quite large and contained significant numbers of younger MPs following relatively good election results for the EPP-affiliated parties, the Partido Popular in Spain (2016/137 MPs), the Civic Platform in Poland (2015/138 MPs), Fine Gael in Ireland (2016/49 MPs) and Homeland Union in Lithuania (2016/31 MPs).

These effects nevertheless do not fully explain the differences in the participation rates of MPs from the 27 of (then) 28 member-states with EPP-affiliated parliamentary parties. Most strikingly, the programme did not recruit a single MP from Forza Italia during 2016-19, although it had 103 MPs before and 104 after the 2018 national elections. Scarascia-Mugnozza (Interview) cites the high average age in the Italian parliament as a reason.

However, Forza Italia with its pragmatically pro-European programme is now dwarfed in opinion polls by the far more radically Eurosceptic Lega and more recently, the neo-fascist Brothers of Italy (Conti et al. 2020). With domestic political conditions characterised by increasingly violent anti-German, anti-French, and anti-EU rhetoric (Pasquinucci 2020), Forza Italia MPs may not be interested in the Erasmus Programme because they lack a sufficiently pro-EU ideological commitment. Similarly, not one MP from Maydell's own Bulgarian GERB party participated, despite it gaining 95 seats in national elections in 2017. Here, its coalition with the Eurosceptic and Russophile United Patriots may well have reduced interest in EP politics (Stoyanov and Kostadinova 2021).

In addition to not being able to achieve a better country and party balance during the first programme phase, the EPP Group also faced three significant practical difficulties (Interview Vandenkendelaere). Initially, Vandenkendelaere aimed to pair the visiting MP continuously with one MEP from another member-state but with aligned policy interests, whose activities they would follow during the 3.5 days long visit. However, the hosting MEPs did not always want the visiting MPs to attend all meetings. A second difficulty arose when MEPs expressed an interest in hosting an MP, but then ended up spending the week in a different than their main committee whose work was of no interest to the visitor. It also turned out, lastly, that many MPs did not want to be paired continuously with an MEP from a different member-state. Instead, many MPs were 'inclined to prioritise meetings with nationals of their own country' (Interview Vandenkendelaere).

As a result of these complications in terms of the programme administration and participant preferences, the actual visit schedules during 2016-19 were very diverse. They depended on whether the week concerned was a Group week or included an EP mini-session in Brussels, the committee schedules and the availabilities of the hosting MEP, Group officials and other interlocutors like EPP-affiliated Commissioners. Despite great variation, all visit programmes

included at least one lunch or other type of meeting with the hosting MEP, at least one meeting with EPP Group staff; attendance at either EPP Group Working Groups to discuss policy issues and/or EP committee meetings; and meetings with the national delegation from their member-state, its Permanent Representation in Brussels or national business or NGO representatives, for example.

Interviewed EPP Group representatives observed that most visiting MPs shared two interests during the preparation of their visits and in Brussels. The first was to seek out ‘networking opportunities for national political reasons’ (Interview Vandenkendelaere), that is, to prioritise contacts that could help them advance their national political career in their own party or government – something that was emphatically not the EPP Group’s intention. However, these MPs’ greater preference for building national over transnational European networks reflects the strong pull-factor of national level party organisations, as they, not a European-level organisation, determine the composition of electoral lists and the distribution of government posts. The second interest was the desire to meet with ‘big shots’ (Interview Kamp) with a greater aura of power and influence than ordinary MEPs. Paradoxically in view of the EPP Group’s interest in strengthening vertical parliamentary networks, many visiting MPs were most impressed by meeting someone from the European Commission as the EU’s executive arm (Interviews Kamp, Vandenkendelaere).

The MPs and the programme: evaluation

The survey corroborated several of the assessments by the interviewed MEPs and EPP Group staff. Crucially, respondents predominantly perceived networking activities as the most valuable aspect of their visit. Given the opportunity to signal more than one programme aspect as valuable, all but one respondent found contacts with members of the EPP Group

secretariat useful (Figure I), who were able to provide them with unbiased information about its structure and operations from a wider Group perspective. Twelve respondents also mentioned networking with EPP MEPs from parties other than their own and eleven referred to meetings with MEPs from their national party (Figure I).

Crucially, however, when asked to prioritise the importance of different networking opportunities, 14 of 17 respondents identified contacts with EPP MEPs – whether from their national or other parties – as the *most important* programme element. Respondents valued such contacts far more highly than meetings with officials from the EPP Group secretariat. While six respondents listed meetings with representatives of the offices of national parliaments in Brussels as helpful, they attained similarly low values as those with EP and EPP Group officials.

Most respondents considered observation of EP committee or EPP Group work less relevant than these networking opportunities. Fewer than one half listed them as a valuable programme element (Figure I). Depending on the individual schedule, such activities included participation in EP committee meetings, EPP Group Working Groups or workshops. Of these, respondents considered participation in EPP Working Group meetings more relevant than observation of EP committees. However, with one exception, no MEP saw participation in one of these meetings as the *most valuable* programme element.

[Insert Figure I about here]

The respondents were also asked about their motivation for participating in the Erasmus Programme. Eight MPs were already strongly motivated before their visit by the prospect of meeting EPP MEPs from their own member-state. Of these, four were from the large

member-states Germany, France, and Spain (2). Four of the eight MPs even identified this as their *main motivation*. Of these four, three were from the large member-states, namely Germany, France, and Spain (Figure II). In total, only five of 17 respondents were from the larger member-states Germany (1), France (1), and Spain (3). However, forging closer links with MEPs from their own member-state was the *main motivation* for three of the five, or 60% of these respondents. These high percentages indicate that MPs from larger member-states are more likely to think of national vertical contacts as more important or even entirely sufficient as opposed to MPs from smaller member-states. They in turn may consider their national MEPs both more easily accessible and/or insufficiently influential to focus so exclusively on national vertical links.

In fact, ten respondents claimed that they were motivated by the chance of meeting MEPs from other member-states and four identified this as their main motivation (Figure II). Seven of these ten MPs came from smaller and/or peripheral member-states in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region as well as Ireland, Greece, and Malta. The number of MEPs from these smaller member-states in the EPP Group is comparatively low, so that they can establish contacts more easily at national level. One MEP from Malta, for example, where the Nationalist Party has three of six MEPs, explained that '[Malta] being a small country, it is very easy for us to have very close ties with our Maltese MEPs' (Survey E4-09). For these MEPs, the Erasmus Programme seems to be an opportunity to compensate for their country's smaller formal representation and powers and informal influence in the EP and the EU through transnational vertical networking. Overall, networking with MEPs was not only the most valued aspect of the programme but also featured as the main motivation of eight respondents.

[Figure II about here]

At the same time, 16 of 17 respondents indicated that they were also motivated before their visit by opportunities to learn more about at least one of the following: the functioning of the EU (11), the EP (14) and the EPP Group (11). Five respondents listed all three learning-based factors when given multiple options (Figure II). In fact, nine of these respondents identified one of these three learning opportunities as their main motivation, representing a slight majority of the respondent pool. Interestingly, from Western Europe only three, a Spanish, a German and an Irish respondent mentioned learning opportunities as their *main motivation* for participating in the programme. In contrast, all CEE MPs who took part in the survey, did so. This finding clearly corroborates the impression among the programme organisers (Interview Maydell) that a knowledge gap about the EU, the EP and the EPP Group persists between parliamentarians from Western Europe and the CEE region – a phenomenon that officials in the EPP Group secretariat believe still characterises the party family generally (Interview Kamp).

The survey also asked MPs to rate their knowledge about the functioning of the EU, the EP and the EPP Group before and after their visit to Brussels. In their self-assessment, knowledge scores increased across the board in all relevant categories (Figure III). 64.6% of respondents scored themselves 7 or higher on a one to ten scale regarding their pre-programme knowledge about the EU. 58.7% and 47.1% of respondents respectively reported 7 or higher knowledge scores on the EP and the EPP Group before their visit. These figures increased to 88.2% of respondents reporting a 7 or higher knowledge score across all three categories after their visit to Brussels (Figure III).

This increase came from an already high baseline, however: on a scale from one to ten, 13 of 17 respondents (76.5%) scored their pre-programme knowledge as five or higher across *all three* categories, with the scores for the EU the highest and for the EPP Group the lowest

(Figure III). Even regarding the EPP Group alone, however, 13 respondents scored themselves five or higher regarding their pre-programme knowledge. The proportion of respondents scoring themselves five or higher across *all three categories* increased to 94.1% after participation in the programme. Given the programme's voluntary nature, these high scores point to the self-selection of MPs with a pre-existing interest in and relatively high knowledge of the EU, the EP and the EPP Group.

[Insert Figure III about here]

In their own self-assessment, participation in the programme also affected respondents' vertical contacts. Regarding those with MEPs from their own national parties, most respondents were already engaging with them two to three times or more per year before their participation in the programme (Figure IV). Only three MPs reported that they rarely had contact with MEPs from their own party prior to their visit to Brussels.

Participation in the programme increased the self-reported frequency of MP contacts with MEPs across the board (Figure IV; V.). The percentage of respondents who are often or very often in contact with MEPs from their own party almost doubled, increasing from 47% to 82.3% after participation (Figure IV). Similarly, the percentage of respondents with occasional or more frequent contacts with MEPs from other EPP-affiliated parties rose from a low 17.7% to 58.8% (Figure V).

[Insert Figures IV and V about here]

The survey also demonstrated that self-reported contact frequencies with non-EPP MEPs were affected, too. Fourteen respondents indicated that they had had no or rare interactions with non-EPP MEPs before their visit. Following their participation in the programme, the number of MPs with at least occasional contacts beyond the EPP Group grew significantly. Whereas 17.6% of participants reported such contacts with non-EPP MEPs for before their visit to Brussels, this increased to 41.2% after their participation.

Participation in the programme, finally, also had a limited intervening effect on respondents' networking with the EPP Group secretariat. The number of MPs who were in contact with the secretariat often or very often remained unchanged from before their visits. However, the number of respondents 'never' in touch with the secretariat halved after participation in the programme, from 6 to 3.

Overall, 16 of 17 respondents rated the programme as good or very good. They did not agree on its impact on their personal political aspirations, however. Ten respondents indicated that their Brussels experience had no effect in this regard. One respondent even felt discouraged by the experience, realising the burden that work as an MEP would have on their 'family and travel [commitments]' (Survey E1-02). Nevertheless, six respondents claimed that they were somewhat or much more likely to run in future EP elections. Crucially, however, they remain keen to seek paths to influence national, rather than transnational, policymaking dynamics. As one Belgian MP put it, 'the EP seemed to be very far from internal Belgian politics, but my visit ... showed that [a] lot of [MEP work] is in favour of internal and national goals and politics' (Survey E0-02). While such effects are intended by the EPP Group in the hope of legitimising its work in the eyes of national lawmakers (Interview Kamp), they cast doubt on the potential for the greater Europeanisation of politics and policymaking in the EP.

Reflecting the outstanding importance of this programme feature for most MPs, five respondents commented additionally on the desirability of further strengthening networking

opportunities during the visits. One MP from Ireland mentioned the desirability of ‘more engagements with other politicians’ (Survey E1-02) and one Belgian MP wished for more contacts ‘with MEPs from other national EPP parties’ (Survey E0-02). Apparently ignorant of the fact that even many MEPs ‘never see a commissioner’ (Interview Kamp) due to their tight and partly international schedules, one MP from Malta suggested just that, ‘meetings with commissioners from the EPP family on subjects of interest’, which could only be organised for two of 29 participants between 2016 and 2019.

Conclusion

Using a mixed-methods approach, this article has explored the Erasmus Programme as the only existing case in the EP of a political group seeking to exercise *strategic* leadership by *systematically* building vertical networks in the EU multilevel parliamentary field. When the programme started in 2016, the EPP Group hoped that it would fulfil four functions: contribute to enhancing the participating national MPs’ knowledge of the EU, the EP, and the EPP Group; re-legitimise the powers of the EP and the EU more generally at the national level; create effective vertical networking among parliamentarians to stabilise EPP and EU governance; and socialise younger parliamentarians into European ways of thinking and acting politically.

Although limited by Covid-19 and the nature of the participant pool, the empirical data has generated novel insights into the evolving roles of EP groups as well as cooperation and competition in the EU multilevel parliamentary field. Most importantly, the research has underlined the need to go more decisively beyond the dominant narrow focus in the literature on the role of EP groups in legislative politics and policymaking. After a phase of intense focus among the pro-integration groups on making the most of the newly increased EP

competences in the Lisbon Treaty, especially the ordinary legislative procedure and the assent procedure for foreign treaties, the case of the EPP Group's Erasmus Programme suggests that these groups may be trying to diversify and develop broader political roles in the EU as a multilevel polity. One key issue for them is that political and electoral challenges from far-right and far-left Eurosceptic parties of one hue or another at the national level have potential to erode the vertical ideological and political cohesion of their Europarty and affiliated groups, which could ultimately also curtail their institutional power. For the EPP Group, engaging in improving vertical networking to stem this trend seems to be a particularly important role in the light of growing Eurosceptic and even *sovereigniste* voices in some member parties and affiliated national groups and the break-down of the EP level cordon sanitaire towards the far right in countries like Italy and Bulgaria.

In this context, the Erasmus Programme constitutes an attempt by the EPP Group to exercise strategic leadership in the increasingly contested EU multilevel parliamentary field. It shows how colluding individual MEPs and officials were able to convince the EPP Group leadership to invest substantial financial and manpower resources into a *systematic* attempt at fostering *structured* vertical cooperation. Importantly, this small group of individuals obtained support for the new programme despite its long-term political goals for the EPP political family not promising to yield any short-term gains connected to EU level politics and policymaking, or what is still the EPP Group's primary preoccupation. Although the programme is limited in its scope and reach, it supports the broader YMN structure and demonstrates the EPP Group's autonomous *strategic* leadership in the EU multilevel parliamentary field, which is in no way derivative either of their affiliated Europarty or national party leaderships. In fact, in some cases it directly challenges national party leaders seeking to adjust their party programmes and discourses to chime more with those of Eurosceptic parties to their right for gaining electoral advantages.

The research has also shown that while the programme so far has met some of the EPP Group's objectives, it has also faced significant obstacles. To begin with, although targeted at national MPs with limited prior knowledge of or emotional attachment to the EU, in its first phase the programme was largely characterised by self-recruiting of participants who already had quite high self-reported knowledge of the EU, the EP, and the EPP Group – a phenomenon that has already been identified for the selection and subsequent election of MEPs, especially those of the centrist pro-integration groups (Defacqz et al. 2019; Buskjær 2009; Scarrow 1997). Crucially, no MPs took part from (then) EPP-affiliated parties that are either Eurosceptic themselves, especially the Hungarian Fidesz, or formally cooperate with heavily Eurosceptic parties at party and/or government level, like Forza Italia in a party alliance and government or the Bulgarian GERB in government until 2021. So far, the programme has largely failed to reach out to those MPs who likely are most sceptical about the desirability of a strong EPP Group and EP role in EU politics or more generally, about the existing powers of the EU, let alone their further increase.

Moreover, the research has found that the main structuring divide in the EU's multilevel parliamentary field may well not be between the EP and national parliaments, or between the EU and the national levels, but between practices of national and of transnational networking *across* the different levels. Based on this research's findings, these practices appear to align at least somewhat with the size and influence of the member-state. In other words, most MPs from larger member-states are strongly focussed on national vertical cooperation with MEPs from their own party, not other EPP-affiliated parties. Paradoxically, by contributing to strengthening national, not transnational, vertical contacts between MPs and MEPs from the same EPP-affiliated parties from the larger member-states, the Erasmus Programme may inadvertently contribute to processes of renationalisation and de-Europeanisation.

The programme's potential impact is also limited by the relatively low number of participants and the unpredictability of their future political careers. The 29 MPs who did participate during 2016-19 only constituted around eight per cent of the members of the larger YMN with its greatly fluctuating membership. Thus, it remains difficult for the EPP Group alone to create vertical parliamentary networks that are both sustainable, not ephemeral, and transnational, not national, and which lead to 'more durable, high-level political engagement' (Interview Vandenkendelaere).

The interviews and survey results, lastly, provide no evidence for the moment of effective European socialisation to counter the tendencies of renationalisation that the interviewees observed at national group and party levels. MPs who already consider themselves quite knowledgeable about the EU, the EP, and the EPP Group, and who have better language skills, are more likely to sign up for the programme. More generally, the visits can perhaps give national MPs a flavour of Brussels as a political-institutional and multicultural space. But 3.5 days in the informal EU capital can hardly turn politicians, who have been primarily socialised in national politics, into 'good' Europeans.

Arguably, such socialisation efforts geared towards making the EU level an equally essential and organic element of political activities and routines to be effective would most likely have to target members of youth organisations of political parties at school and university level, not when they are already MPs. As studies of elite socialisation in Europe have shown (e.g. Favell 2009), transnational contacts need to start early and become habitual in a private, educational or professional context to have lasting impact on perceptions, attitudes, and preferences. Even then, such efforts would have to counteract the strong institutional pull-factor that the national level parties exert as they largely continue to determine the political prospects of politicians from the EPP or any other political family in the EU.

Despite its novel insights, this article can only mark a first step towards exploring emerging roles of EP groups in the EU multilevel parliamentary field that extend beyond EU politics and policymaking. While they also entertain more sporadic and ad hoc vertical contacts, for example via their Europarty youth organisation and activities organised by their affiliated European or national foundations, so far, no other EP group has developed their own Erasmus Programme or similarly systematic approach to enhancing cooperation with their affiliated national groups. This lack of similar initiatives makes it impossible for the moment to conduct systematically comparative research on vertical networking across the political spectrum.

In the meantime, future research could try to map the contacts and networks resulting from the Erasmus Programme or more haphazard forms of vertical contacts in the case of other EP groups. This would require a longitudinal research design, which could draw on a mixed-methods approach integrating social network analysis with a follow-up survey and interviews, for example on a five-year time scale after the participants' initial visits to Brussels. Such research could also assess the scope and intensity of exchange and communication in vertical networks and their evolution over time. It could include views from future participants and capture the trajectory of the programme when relaunched as Covid-19 restrictions ease. In this way, a clearer picture could emerge for this case or other cases, whether vertical networking among MEPs and national MPs field is significant and meaningful, with long-term impact on the EU multilevel parliamentary field and polity.

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Acknowledgements and captions for figures:

- We would like to acknowledge Alexandra Csatari's work on the figures used in this article.
- Figure I: Respondent perceptions on the valued and most valued aspects of the EPP Group Erasmus Programme.
- Figure II: Respondent motivations to participate in the EPP Group Erasmus Programme
- Figure III: Self-reported respondent knowledge about the EU, the EPP and the EPP Group
- Figure IV: Respondent contact frequencies with MEPs from their own party
- Figure V: Respondent contact frequencies with EPP MEPs from other member states

Figures:

Figure I:

Valued and Most Valued Aspects of the 'Erasmus Programme' (N = 17)

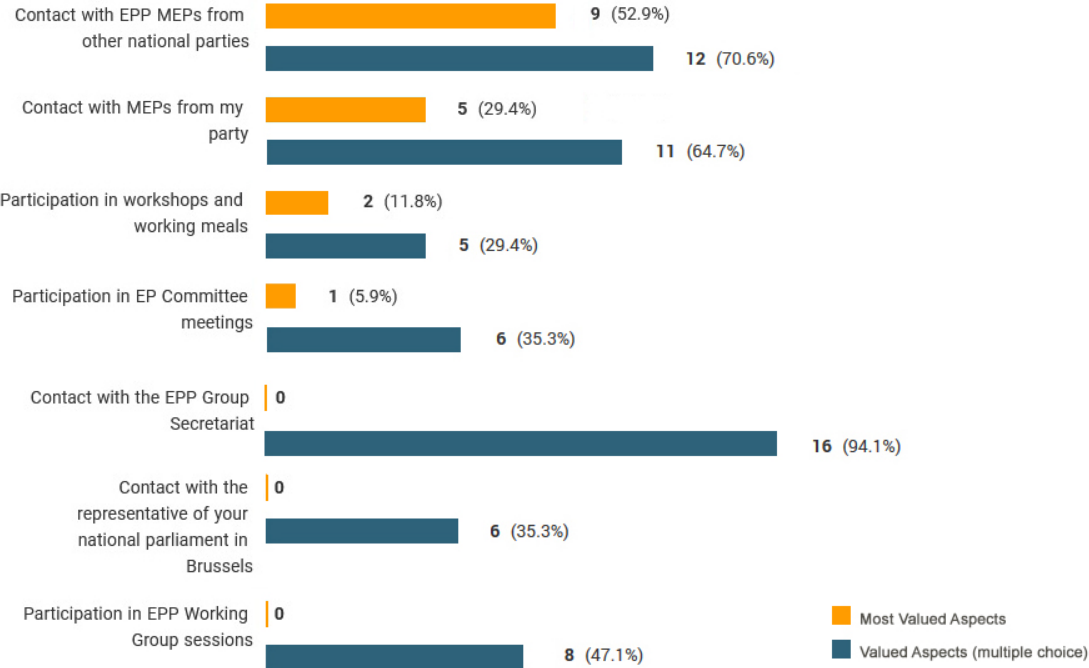


Figure II:

Motivations to Participate (N = 17)

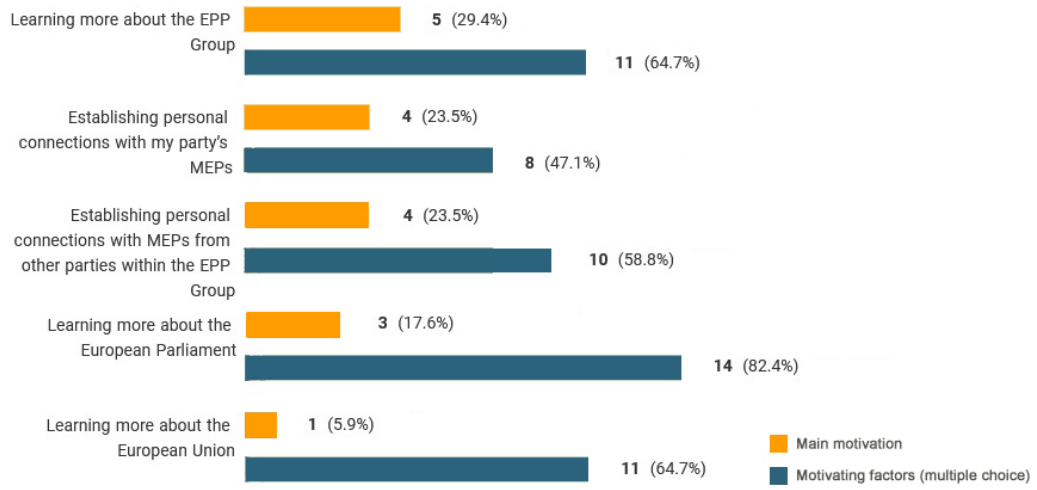
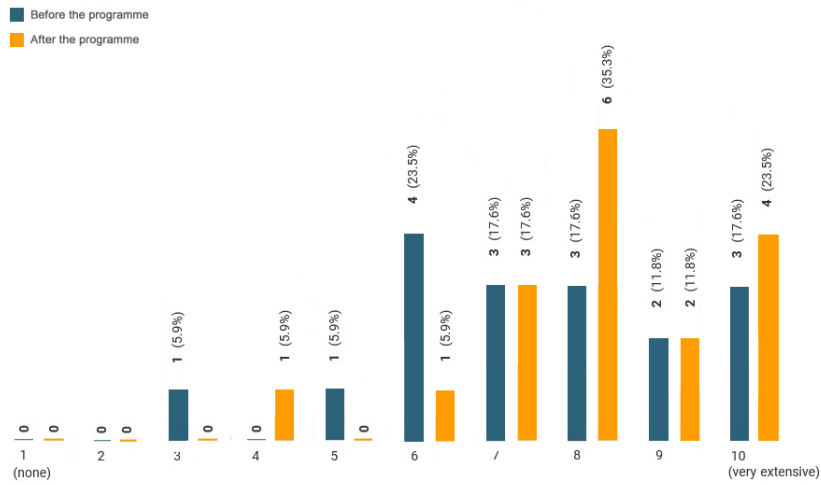
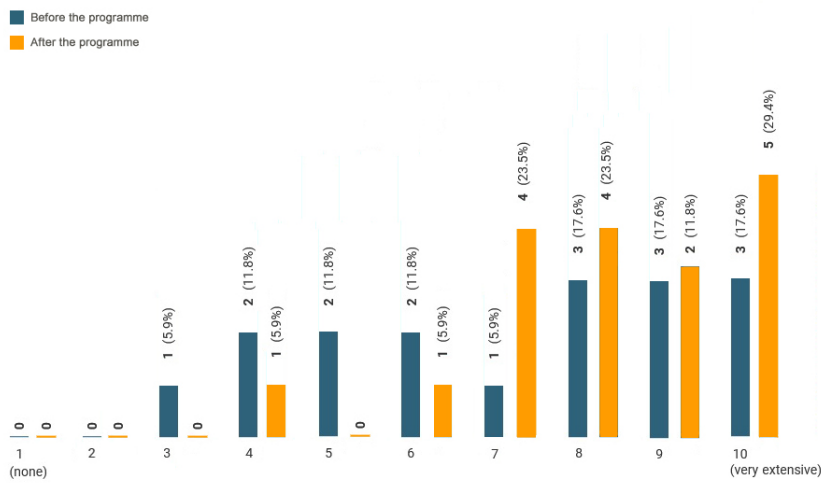


Figure III:

Self-reported respondent knowledge about the EU before and after the programme (N = 17)



Self-reported respondent knowledge about the European Parliament before and after the programme (N = 17)



Self-reported respondent knowledge about the EPP Group before and after the programme (N = 17)

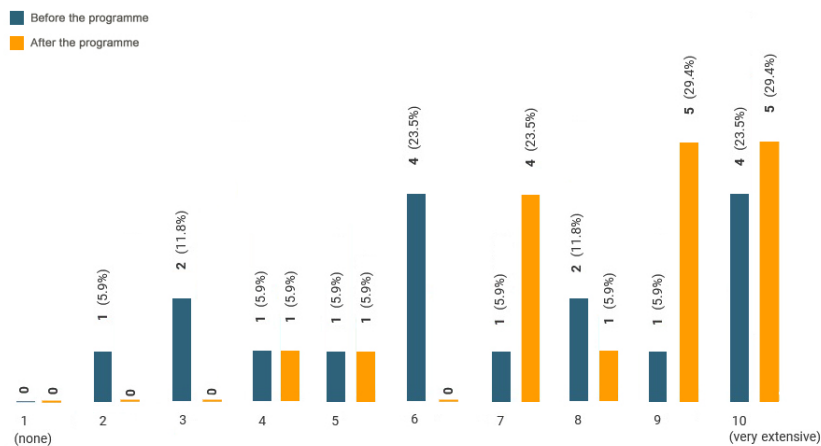


Figure IV:

Contact frequencies with MEPs from their own party (N = 17)

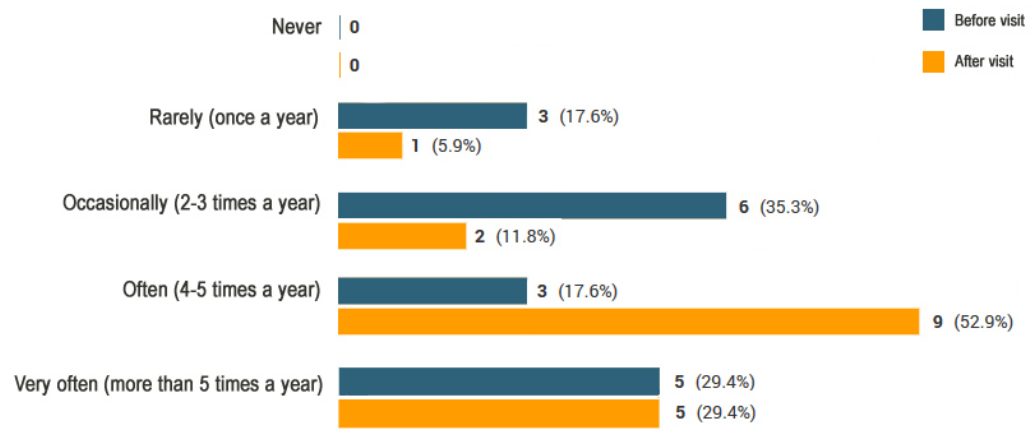


Figure V:

Contact frequencies with EPP MEPs from other member states (N = 17)

