Not transnational lists, transnational *parties*

Despite nationalist parties across Europe jumping on EU institutions' lack of democracy to bolster their electorate, pro-European parties have yet to fully seize themselves of this topic and advance concrete solutions to strengthen European democracy.

Among the few proposals put forward, however, one seems to have become a lingering discussion — even negotiation — item in Brussels: transnational lists for the election of the European Parliament.

Voted down by the European Parliament in February 2018[1] and receiving only lukewarm support from the European Council,[2] this reform remains a key proposal for Emmanuel Macron[3] and was later supported by Angela Merkel[4] and alluded to by Ursula von der Leyen in her speech to Parliament.[5]

Yet, what may seem like a no-nonsense way to promote a "more European" Europe is, upon closer examination, unlikely to make our elections and politics more integrated, and completely foreign to the workings of federal systems. The ills it seeks to remedy are real, but the solution lies elsewhere.

What are transnational lists?

At its core, the idea of transnational lists simply refers to an election where all European citizens vote together for their representatives, irrespective of their country of citizenship or vote.[6] All eligible citizens are grouped in one single constituency.

In practice, transnational lists can be implemented in two different ways. The first option is to have all European citizens vote together on all the seats to be filled in the European Parliament: European parties submit lists of candidates, citizens vote for a list, and each

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[1] A report "on the composition of the European Parliament" supporting transnational lists was adopted by the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament in January 2017. However, the resolution drawn from this report was amended to remove all mentions of transnational lists before its adoption in the EP's Plenary in February 2018. The content of the Plenary debates on 7 February can be found here.

[2] During its informal meeting of 23 February, 2018, the European Council diplomatically decided to "come back to this issue in the future, with a view to the 2024 elections."

[3] President Macron mentioned transnational lists as early as his Sorbonne address of September 2017 (in French, English, and summarised here) and later repeatedly made calls in this direction, along with his party's Renew Europe list.

[4] In the June 2018 Meseberg Declaration, Germany and France jointly decide "to put in place transnational lists for European elections as of 2024."

[5] Von der Leyen's speech, however, remains careful, limiting itself to the "need to address the issue of transnational lists at the European elections as a complementary tool of European democracy."

[6] Since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, European citizens hold the right to vote in European elections where they reside, even outside of their country of citizenship.

list receives a percentage of the vote. This takes the currently predominant national system for European elections (see Fig. 1) and applies it to the whole of the European Union.

A proportional vote with one single constituency ensures that all European citizens have exactly the same input (one person, one vote) and the same level of representation. Moreover, the overall political opinion of citizens is properly represented, as each party gets a share of seats that matches its share of the popular opinion.
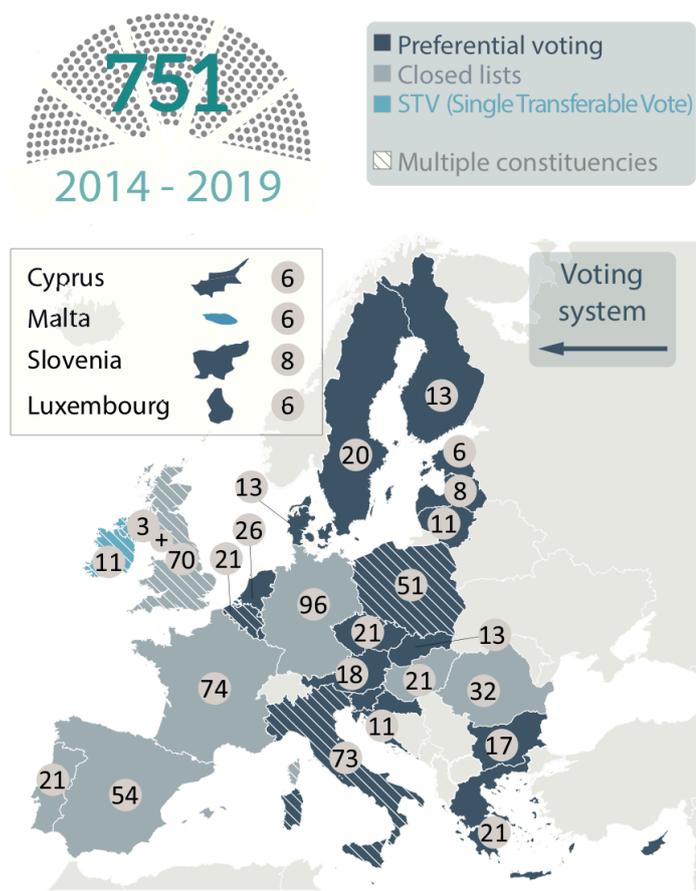

Fig. 1: Voting systems for EU Parliamentary elections,
number of MEPs is pre-Brexit(Credit: EPRS)

However, the limitation of this idea is quickly apparent. With 751 seats to fill (pre-Brexit count), each list would comprise hundreds of candidates. Even if parties did not feel the need to present over 700 candidates, that number would be well over 200-300.[7] Since eight lists ran for the 2019 election,[8] this would amount to a minimum of 1,600 candidates.

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[7] The European Parliament's largest party, the European People's Party (EPP), currently has 182 representatives, and had 216 in the previous legislature. It is fair to expect that they would present far more candidates.

[8] There are currently 10 European parties registered by the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations. In the 2019 EP election, eight lists ran and seven made the cut — with the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) failing to constitute a group in Parliament. In addition, many candidates run independently.

Since it would be inconceivable for citizens to get acquainted with so many candidates, or even a notable fraction of them, citizens would vote not for candidates but for the ideas of a party or list. As a result, we can expect a complete disconnect between citizens and candidates: citizens would have no direct representative to turn to, while candidates would neither know their constituents, nor even have a true incentive to campaign. Say your party regularly elects 150 MEPs and you stand on the 50th position, why bother seriously go on the campaign trail? Candidates would therefore not be chosen for their relationship to the voters, but based on their ability to please party insiders.

The second option, supported by Renew Europe and a number of MEPs left and right, is more subtle. It would keep the existing national apportionment (the distribution of MEPs per country), for candidates elected at the national level, and add a transnational constituency for which all European would vote together. This would be achieved by having citizens express two votes on their ballot: one vote for their "national" MEPs and one for their "European" MEPs. In effect, these MEPs would have the same status, but be elected somewhat differently.

Brexit provided a particularly interesting opportunity here, since it held the promise to vacate the UK's 73 seats. By using parts or all of these seats,[9] supporters of this idea circumvented accusations of making the European Parliament bigger and more expensive. Admittedly, they would still be accused of failing to make it smaller, but that argument carries less weight. Symbolically, this also allows to transform the departure of an EU Member as an opportunity for more integration. A welcome *pied-de-nez* to Brexiteers.

The current state of European elections

The core idea in favour of this proposal is therefore that creating an EU-wide constituency for a group of MEPs would make our European elections more European. But what does it mean to "make European elections more European"? Aren't European elections already European, since we have a common election?

The European parliamentary elections are for a single body, but they are nowhere near a unified election. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) gives the European Parliament the right to make proposals for a unified procedure for adoption by the European Council.[10] Unfortunately, the Council has failed to agree on a unified procedure and settled instead for "common principles": elections must be based on proportional representation, either through lists or "single transferable vote".[11]

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[9] Of the UK's 73 pre-Brexit seats, 27 have already been redistributed to amend the EP's apportionment; candidates from 14 countries have been elected for these seats and will take up their seats once the UK officially leave the EU. Renew Europe's proposal is to use 27 of the 46 remaining seats for transnational lists.

[10] According to Article 223.1 TFEU, the European Parliament can propose "the election of its Members by direct universal suffrage" through "a uniform procedure in all Member States" for adoption by the European Council. A similar provision is found in the 1976 Act concerning the election of the representatives of the Assembly by direct universal suffrage (Article 7.1)

[11] The 2002 revision of the Act of 1976 also provides for a few other common principles, including the ability for a Member State to establish internal constituencies, the ability to apply an electoral threshold of maximum 5%, as well as other provisions regarding campaign expenses. The Act of 1976 was further revised in 2018.

As a result, the modalities of the elections differ from country to country, inducing major and minor differences in citizens' rights:

- In Austria and Malta, the voting age is 16; in Greece, 17; in the rest of the Union, 18.
- In Belgium, Greece and Luxembourg, voting is compulsory; not in the rest of the Union.
- EU citizens residing abroad can vote for lists in their Member State of residence, but different requirements of residence apply.
- EU citizens residing abroad can vote in their Member State of origin, but different requirements apply, such as conditions on the time spent away.
- Non-EU Commonwealth citizens residing in the UK and Gibraltar, as well as certain Brazilian citizens under a special status in Portugal, are allowed to vote in European elections.
- Parties in France, Belgium, Poland and Hungary, among others, need to overcome a 5% threshold to get into Parliament, while there is no threshold in Germany or Spain.
- Belgium, Ireland and the UK are divided into several constituencies; Poland and Italy have a single constituency but seats are allocated to regional lists; other countries have nation-wide constituencies.
- Finally, with seats apportioned according to a degressive proportionality, Malta has one MEP for every 80,000 inhabitants, while Germany has one MEP for every 865,000 inhabitants, making Maltese citizens almost eleven times more represented than their German counterparts.

Fig. 2: Voting methods for citizens resident abroad (Credit: EPRS)

But, most importantly, European elections are led, in each country, by national parties. National parties choose candidates, draft electoral programmes, decide on political alliances, spend money, go on the campaign trail, are elected, and, under certain conditions, get reimbursed for their campaign expenses. Once elected, national candidates join this or that European party — with little suspense for major parties, who often already belong to specific European parties, and more uncertainty for smaller parties or independent candidates.

Of course, European parties do exist and often draft an electoral manifesto ahead of the European elections. However, this manifesto is never used at the national level and never presented to voters, candidates of the same Europarty do not travel between countries, and there are no joint campaigns or rallies to speak of. For all intents and

purposes, campaigns for European elections are run nationally.[12]

As a result, electoral programmes submitted to voters target a national constituency and are designed for a purely national audience. Proposals do not seek to convince Europeans, but only national citizens. Elaborated separately, national programmes of the same Europarty lack coherent and often contradict each other.
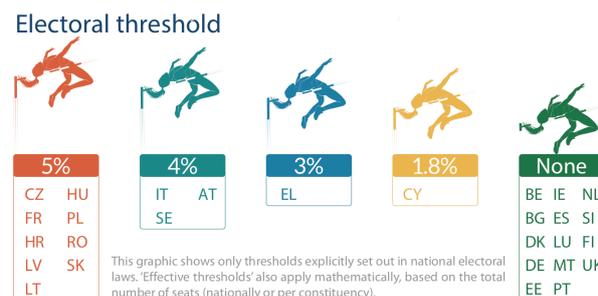
Electoral threshold

5%	4%	3%	1.8%	None
CZ HU	IT AT	EL	CY	BE IE NL
FR PL	SE			BG ES SI
HR RO				DK LU FI
LV SK				DE MT UK
LT				EE PT

This graphic shows only thresholds explicitly set out in national electoral laws. 'Effective thresholds' also apply mathematically, based on the total number of seats (nationally or per constituency).

Fig. 3: Electoral thresholds per country for 2019 EP elections (Credit: EPRS)

In the words of then-ALDE President and MEP Guy Verhofstadt: "A fundamental problem of the European elections is the fact that they are not at all European, but the sum of national election laws, election lists, and of national election campaigns."[13]

Would transnational lists reach their stated goal?

The question is therefore whether transnational lists would indeed contribute to making this election more European in nature; whether adopting a common list for all EU citizens, in addition to national lists, could trigger a European discussion on the EU's policies and the future of the European project.

Review of arguments

Accordingly, supporters of transnational lists have made the case that these lists would palliate the national aspect of European elections and finally make them European. Here is a critical review of their arguments.[14]

> *The link between MEPs and their electorate would be made stronger. Transnational lists give voters more power at the expense of backroom deals. People will decide who becomes the next commission president.*

Since the proposed system would not alter the existing national constituencies, it would not affect them: the link between these MEPs and their electorate would therefore not be made stronger or more tenuous. The link between voters and candidates on transnational lists, however, would depend on the way these candidates are chosen. At best, they would be chosen by European parties following proposals by national parties;

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[12] Of course, there are a few counter-examples to this statement. Several nationalist parties did organise joint rallies, including France's Marine Le Pen, Italy's Matteo Salvini and Holland's Geert Wilders. DiEM25 did draft a common programme and campaigned on it in a number of countries; in the end, however, its candidates were mostly from national parties associated to DiEM25. And Volt did draft a common programme and campaigned on it in the eight countries where it ran under the same name, same brand, and same proposals — so far the most extensive example of a real European campaign.

[13] Why transnational lists are good for European democracy, Guy Verhofstadt et al., Euractiv, 6 February 2018

[14] Here are several links to pro-transnational lists tribunes and articles, by Renew Europe, the Jacques Delors Institute, the Spinelli Group, and experts Alberto Alemanno and Angelos Chryssogelos and Malgorzata Staniaszek.

more likely, they would be imposed by national parties, which would make their representativeness of *all Europeans* quite limited. Voters of a given country would most likely only be familiar, at most, with the one or few candidates from their country.

The argument about the choice of the President of the Commission relates to the idea of having each European party's Spitzenkandidat — the lead candidate supposed to become President of the Commission in case of a victory — as list leader of that European party's translational list. This point is doubly interesting. Not only are transnational lists not required for a functioning Spitzenkandidat system, but the "Spitz" was just recently declared dead following the European Council's refusal to appoint a declared Spitzenkandidat for the Presidency of the Commission, and the European Parliament's approval of a nominee who was not a Spitzenkandidat.

It is worthy of note that those who seem here to support the Spitzenkandidat system were the same who decided or agreed to abandon it for the 2019 elections in favour of backroom deals.

Some may argue that the transnational list system would give every citizen the opportunity to directly vote for the Spitzenkandidat of his or her choice, since he would lead the party's transnational list. However, since the vote is proportional, citizens do not vote for individual candidates but for a party. It is unlikely that voters would vote against their party simply by opposition to the list leader. If we really want voters to choose the next Commission president, then each party should organise an EU-wide primary for the designation of its Spitzenkandidat.

> *Voters will get two votes instead of one: they will have twice as much direct influence as they have now. If anything it will increase democracy, not diminish it. Transnational lists would be chosen in a transparent and democratic procedure. The process reflects the nomination of lead candidates, which are not perceived as elitist or top-down.*

While voters would indeed get two votes, the first part of this argument is abusive. As indicated above, since voters would vote twice for a party — unlike in the Bundestag election, where citizens once for an individual and once for a party —, there is no reason for them to vote for two different parties. Since all voters would keep more or less the same power, the fact that each would vote twice does not change their overall power, and each voter's influence would remain exactly the same. The European Parliament would also not gain more prerogatives in the process and the Council would remain more powerful than Parliament.

As for the choice of candidates on transnational lists, this would indeed most likely mirror the selection of "national" candidates, where individual citizens already have very limited input.

> *No Member State will lose a seat due to their introduction of transnational lists and transnational lists would not expand the gap between smaller and larger Member States. The French government presented proposals to prevent over-representation, including having candidates from at least one third of the Member States, no single Member State exceeding 25%, having the first candidates from different Member States, and alternating nationalities.*

This argument is technically true, but also slightly deceiving. Indeed, no State would lose a seat, since transnational lists add seats. However, since what truly matters for the representation of citizens of a country is a State's share of seats within Parliament, we must look at percentages.

If all States were to get an equal share from the transnational lists — with one candidate for each State —, then a small State's ratio of seats would increase more than a larger one's. Malta's share would grow from 6 to 7 seats (a comfortable 17% increase), while Germany's would only grow from 96 to 97 seats (a meagre 1% increase).

Of course, it is unlikely that every State would get one seat in the end. We must therefore look at which nationalities would make it to the top of each transnational list, and it is not so hard to imagine that larger countries or parties would ensure their own greater chances by pushing their candidates higher up the list.

EPP	S&D	Renew Europe	Greens	ID	ECR	GUE
Germany (29)	Spain (20)	France (20)	Germany (25)	Italy (28)	Poland (26)	Spain (6)
Poland (17)	Italy (19)	UK (17)	France (12)	France (22)	Italy (5)	Germany (6)
Romania (14)	Germany (16)	Spain (8)	UK (11)	Germany (11)	Czech Rep (4)	Finland (6)
Hungary (13)	Romania (10)	Romania (8)	Netherlands (3)	Belgium (3)	Netherlands (4)	France (5)
Spain (12)	UK (10)	Germany (7)	Czech Rep (3)	Austria (3)	UK (4)	Ireland (4)
France (8)	Portugal (9)	Netherlands (6)	Belgium (3)	Czech Rep (2)	Belgium (3)	Portugal (4)
Greece (8)	Poland (8)	Czech Rep (6)	Spain (2)	Finland (2)	Spain (3)	Cyprus (2)

Fig. 4: Largest country delegations for each EP political group. In black, the elected nationalities if rankings on the list reflect each delegation's importance. In parenthesis, each delegation's number of MEPs.

A review of the number of seats held by each national delegation within each political group in Parliament confirms that the EU's largest States are consistently the most powerful players within each group (see Fig. 4). Since the ranking on transnational lists is likely to boil down to country-to-country bargaining, we can expect the largest delegations to grab the top positions.[15]

The proposed measures of the French government constitute a well-thought system to prevent over-representation across each list. However, since no single European Party usually gains more than 25% of the vote,[16] only the first 6 or 7 seats of the list really

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[15] There is no exact correlation between the relative sizes of national delegations and the rankings of transnational lists. However, the nationalities of each political group's chair shed light on the power of the largest delegations. In Parliament, five of the seven political groups are chaired or co-chaired by nationals of their largest delegation. The EPP is chaired by German Manfred Weber, the S&D by Spanish Iratxe Garcia, the Greens by German Ska Keller (co-president with Belgian Philippe Lamberts), ID by Italian Marco Zanni, and the ECR by Polish Ryszard Legutko (co-president with Italian Raffaele Fitto). As for the remaining two groups, Renew Europe was widely expected to be led by French Nathalie Loiseau but insensitive comments led to her replacement by Romanian Dacian Ciolos, while GUE/NGL is chaired by French Manon Aubry and German Martin Schirdewan and has, for the past twenty years, alternated between German, French and Spanish leaders, reflecting its more egalitarian composition.

[16] The S&D won the popular vote in 2014 with 24.4%, while the EPP won in 2019 with 21%.

matter (and even fewer seats for smaller parties).[17] As such, only the rule asking lists to have their first seven members of different nationalities really matters.

Despite good intentions, candidates from transnational lists would therefore indeed over-represent largest States or parties (see Fig. 5), with at least 24 of the 27 transnational seats seized by the EU's seven largest Member States.[18] The only limitation to this over-representation is, ironically, the re-introduction of nation-based quotas and rules for the one list supposed to highlight the European side of this election.

	Seats from TNL	**Ranking by gain from TNL**	**Ranking by population**
Germany	5	1	1
France	4	2	2
Spain	4	2	5
United Kingdom	3	4	3
Italy	3	4	4
Romania	3	4	7
Poland	2	7	6
Hungary	1	8	14

Fig. 5: Number of seats gained by each Member State from
transnational lists (based on rankings in Fig. 4), compared to each
country's ranking by population in the EU.

A variant of this argument is to say that transnational seats are European and therefore do not count for the distribution of seats among Member States. Of course, this is purely speculative: even if transnational lists do not affect the number of seats going to national lists, they do change the overall number of seats held by each State.

As highlighted before, the current "degressive proportionality" used to allocate seats to each country induces major inequalities of representation between citizens. Instead of maintaining this over-representation and accepting a biased system to partially compensate it, it would be more effective to do away with degressive proportionality and ensure the equal representation of European citizens through proportional apportionment.[19]

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[17] Namely 5 for the S&D, 4 for Renew Europe, 3 for the Greens/EFA and ID, and 2 for the ECR, GUE and the EFDD.

[18] Fig. 5 shows that, based on the 2019 election results, 25 of the proposed 27 transnational seats would go to eight countries, including the EU's seven largest. The remaining two seats account for the election of non-affiliated MEPs. Depending on electoral rules, these seats could be either apportioned between Europarties managing to create political groups in the EP, or held by non-affiliated MEPs. Either way, they may well also provide more seats to the EU largest countries.

[19] A more thorough reform of EU institutions would transform the Council of the European Union into a Senate, better able to represent the diversity of States and represent the interest of their citizens. More information on EuropeanConstitution.eu.

> *As a Dutch citizen and European citizen, I should be able to elect by direct universal suffrage a Spanish member of the European Parliament, or a Greek could elect an Estonian.*

This more emotional argument tries explicitly to link translational lists to tearing down national borders. However, it fails to take into account that it is already entirely possible for, let's say, a Dutch citizen to elect a Spanish citizen to the European Parliament should this person run in the Netherlands. Former Italian Secretary of State for European Affairs Sandro Gozi was thus elected to the European Parliament on the French Renew Europe list.[20]

Making campaigns more European

Unfortunately, not only are these arguments limited in their veracity but none really make the case that the election itself — the campaign, the programme, the rallies, the debates — would be more European with transnational lists.

And, indeed, there is evidence to believe that these lists will not make the election more European. The fact is that we *already* have so-called European parties, but that national parties have managed to subvert them and to remain in charge of political affairs. Our representatives are *already* sitting in the European Parliament according to their European party, yet the vast majority of the European population never hears about Europarties, and political life remains nation-based and guided by national parties. The mere introduction of national lists will not change this fact.

Will these lists come up with a common electoral programme? Europarties already have manifestoes, and it is more than likely that national parties will keep their respective programmes explaining what each country will do for Europe.

Will these lists lead to candidates traveling from country to country? It is more than likely that national parties will continue to lead the show and tell their supporters to vote for the Europarty they belong to. Voters will therefore not vote for a transnational list by conviction for a Europarty, but simply by affiliation to their national party.

Will these lists at least give a European flavour to the voting process? European citizens will continue to vote on separate days, depriving them of a joint, European moment of communion. We can also expect ballots to continue showing national parties' logos on the ballot, maybe alongside that of the European party. At best, this may make it a little bit harder for separate national parties belonging to the same Europarty to pretend that they oppose each other, but national parties oftentimes enter publicly into alliances for European elections.

Overall, what European parties have failed to accomplish in 40 years of existence can hardly be expected to change with a few common seats for as long as the entire process remains in the hands of national parties.

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[20] Sandro Gozi was elected as part of France's supplementary seats and will take up his position when Brexit officially takes places.

Interestingly, no federal country uses federation-wide lists (the equivalent of the EU's proposed transnational lists) for its legislative elections.[21] The United States, for instance, elects the House of Representatives based on small federal electoral districts: every State is divided into as many federal district as it has Representatives, and every district elects one Representative. In the upper house, Senators are each elected by their State's population. There is no US-wide list for the legislature.

Likewise, in Germany, the Bundestag — the lower house — is elected through a double vote, akin to the proposal system for EU transnational lists. However, the first vote is for a directly-elected *local* representative, drawn from a small constituency, while the second vote ensures the proportional representation of political parties by adding representatives from lists constituted for each *Land* (State), and not from a Germany-wide list.

This absence of best practices for the use of transnational lists in federal systems has led a number of prominent voices to openly speak against transnational lists, sometimes against their party line, with then-MEP and former President of the Union of European Federalists Elmar Brok going as far as calling them "a sin against federalism."[22]

Pressed on this point, MEPs writing a joint tribune — Jo Leinen and Mercedes Bresso (S&D), Guy Verhofstadt and Sophie in 't Veld (then-ALDE, now Renew Europe), Pascal Durand (then-Greens/EFA, now Renew Europe), Jérôme Lavrilleux (EPP), Philippe Lamberts (Greens/EFA), and Dimitrios Papadimoulis (GUE/NGL) — revert to the EU's famous get-out-of-jail-free card: "the European Union is an entity *sui generis.*" In other words, the EU is its own structure and cannot be compared to other political entities. A very useful way to avoid any comparison with existing models.

They continue: "In federal States, usually an integrated party system is in place. Thus, in all parts, the same parties run for election. In the European Union this is not the case." And this, indeed, is where the solution lies.

Transnational parties for a true European democracy

In and of themselves, transnational lists could have the effect of making the election more European. However, politics is not carried out in a vacuum and setting up transnational lists while maintaining a system largely dominated by national parties will not have the desired effect.

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[21] Indeed, the equivalent of transnational lists does exist in federal countries but for the election of the leader of the executive. In Germany, this election is indirect, as it is carried out by a Federal Convention that gathers all Bundestag members, as well as an equal number of electors elected by the state legislatures in proportion to their respective populations. In the US, this election can be called semi-indirect, as a special country-wide popular election is carried out (the presidential election) but leads to the election of an electoral college, which in turns elects the President. In Austria, this election is direct and the President is therefore elected by the entire eligible population, making his candidacy the equivalent of a transnational election for the federated *Länder* (States).

[22] Interview with Elmar Brok by Gesine Weber, The New Federalist, 5 April 2018. Other worthy analyses against transnational lists exist, including by members of the University of Leuven (here) or members of the UEF (here).

Considering European parties

Much like the creation of Europarties in their current form, the drafting of European electoral manifestoes by these Europarties, or even the Spitzenkandidat system itself, transnational lists will remain subservient to the interest of national parties and not make the election and the campaign more European. They are not a sufficient condition for this europeanisation and, as federal systems around the world prove, they are not a necessary, or even wishful, condition either. It would be enough that only a minority of federations would have transnational lists, but it speaks volume that none have them at all.

Are we therefore doomed to maintain nation-centric European elections? Is there no way to efficiently make this election European?

As Verhofstadt *et al.* recognise, all true federal systems have integrated political parties. The Spinelli Group, a Euro-federalist group of which Guy Verhofstadt is a founder, adds that "democracy in Europe requires real political parties at European level competing with each other for votes and seats."[23]

The first step in democratising the European Union is to realise that, while the European Union currently has a unique political structure — more integrated than confederations, less integrated than federations —, it does not exist separately from the rest of political entities. All political systems and all federal models are unique, but they can learn from each other. Likewise, calling the EU "sui generis" to avoid any useful comparison with other political systems is non-sensical and counterproductive. From this perspective, the political systems of large democratic federations — such as the United States, India or Brazil — can provide useful insight.

European parties in practice

Actually, despite minor policy differences and lines of fracture on specific issues, the political spectrum of most European countries is, by and large, very similar. Most countries possess right-wing/conservative parties, left-wing/socialist parties, centre-right/liberal parties, centre-left/progressive parties, green parties, extreme-right/nationalist parties and extreme-left/communist/anti-capitalist parties. Variations abound, especially with countries facing specific issues such as regional self-determination, but this remains the standard template. This is why — despite conflicting policy positions between parties — electoral alliances in the European Parliament have been rather straight-forward and stable over time.[24]

A reasonable path for the creation of true European parties would therefore be the progressive integration of national parties into a common structure, adopting the same name, logo and, eventually, political programme. Country-based policy differences could persist for national-level issues but overall coherence would increase and party structures would become integrated.

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[23] The Spinelli Group does support transnational lists as a first step towards "real" European parties. Transnational lists are supposed to strengthen the Spitzenkandidat system. However, following the 2019 elections, the same Heads of States that had supported transnational lists discarded the Spitzenkandidat system.

[24] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule exist, such as the UK's Conservative Party — the country's main right-wing party — sitting with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) instead of with the European People's Party (EPP).

Such true European parties, without the need for transnational lists, would be able to present a single electoral programme for European elections and organise EU-wide primaries for the election of their lead candidate. This primary, unlike a vote for a transnational list, would allow party members to truly have a say for their candidate to the presidency of the European Commission — and thereby avoid the regular scenario of electing lead candidates unknown to the general public and, at best, introducing him or her to voters during the campaign.

The creation of such parties requires a review of the current statute of European political parties,[25] in particular to define them as parties (and not, as currently the case, as *cooperations of national parties*), authorise and organise cross-border mechanisms including elections, general assemblies and joint funding, and provide for the necessary EU-level oversight of these entities.

Despite the absence of these mechanisms, the most far-reaching attempt at a pan-European political party is Volt.[26] Created as a movement in 2017, Volt has, from the start, designed its structure as a federalised party, working with a central entity — Volt Europa — and national chapters (Volt Deutschland, Volt Italia, Volt Österreich, etc.). Each chapter develops its own national programme but policies must be in line with the European structure's policies which are adopted by the party as a whole. In 2019, Volt ran for the European elections in eight countries and won a seat in Germany.

Creating our political union

This example shows that European-wide parties can be a reality, provided there be a willingness to set them up. So far, national parties have resisted this integration into European structures and it is more than likely that the mere introduction of transnational lists would fail to create integrated parties, in the same way that manifestoes or lead candidates have failed in the past.

A surer way for the creation of real European parties is a review of the statute of Europarties and the creation of incentives and constraints. Incentives should include specific financing for the integrated European parties and a facilitation of their operations; constraints should include the necessity to run campaigns under — and only under — the name and logo of European parties.[27] Such changes would push parties to integrate, without direct obligations for national parties.

But making our election more European goes beyond the creation of true European parties and must go hand-in-hand with a profound reform of our electoral system, including through a unified electoral system.

For the European Parliament, the idea of a double vote is a sensible one. As for the Bundestag elections, European citizens should be able to vote for a local candidate, standing for a local constituency — with each local constituency across Europe electing

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[25] The statute of European political parties and political foundations is laid out in a Regulation of the European Parliament and Council of the European Union. Its most recent version was adopted in 2014.

[26] Pan-European Parties in a Time of Resurgent Nationalism, Caspar Kolster and Henrik von Homeyer, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 16 May 2019.

[27] The 2018 revision of the Act of 1976 provides, in Article 3b, that "Member States *may allow* for the display, on ballot papers, of the name or logo of the European political party to which the national political party or individual candidate is affiliated." (emphasis added)

one representative. A second vote, for a European party, would ensure overall proportionality by drawing MEPs from country-wide lists — and not transnational lists. Of course, as is already the case, all citizens can stand for elections on either the local or country list, provided they reside in the constituency in question.

Current European election
Single national vote
Citizens vote for national candidates according to national rules and common European principles

Proposed transnational lists	
National vote	Transnational vote
Citizens vote for national candidates according to national rules and common European principles	*Citizens vote for short joint EU-wide lists (27 seats)*

Reformed voting system for European Parliament	
Local vote	Party vote
Citizens vote uniformly for a single candidate from a small, local constituency	*Citizens vote for a party to ensure proportionality, MEPs will be drawn from national lists*

Final considerations

Overall, the appeal of transnational lists stems from two misconceptions. The first one is an underestimation of the survival instinct of national parties. Unless pushed to do so through incentives and constraints, national parties will work hard to maintain their predominance over the EU´s political life. Creating a short list comprising candidates of different nationalities will not change the core of the campaigns, nor those who run them. At best, we can except citizens to have more visibility about the names of Europarties, but national parties will remain at the helm, from the drafting of national programmes, to the selection of national candidates and list leaders, to the selection of the one or few transnational candidates and the bargaining for their position on the list.

The second misconception concerns the role of the legislature and the executive, and their relation to citizens. The legislature's paramount role is to propose, discuss and adopt the law. As such, it must reflect the diversity of the electorate at the local level and be as close as possible to the citizens. Despite not possessing the right to legislative initiative, the European Parliament — and European citizens — would gain from MEPs closer to citizens, and better understanding and representing their interests. By contrast, the executive provides the impetus for government action and acts for all citizens. As such, its choice must stems from the entirety of the electorate, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, the proper way to make our political system more European is not to maintain a nation-based system and provide for a small dose of "cross-nation", but to

go well beyond the nation-State — above and below — by electing our representatives locally and our executive at the European level. For the European Parliament, a "European perspective" stemming from a "unified local perspective throughout Europe".

As we have seen, transnational lists are neither sufficient nor necessary to make our election more European and thereby strengthen our European democracy. Nevertheless, one could argue that transnational lists "can't hurt" and that we may still gain from their adoption. However, transnational lists do carry an actual risk. Not only do they entrench and strengthen a political system dominated by national parties, but, by achieving *some* reform of European elections, they are likely to diffuse any pressure for a more thorough reform and stifle the creation of true European parties — the element we *cannot* have a political union without — for years to come.

Real European parties, crucial as they may be, are not the only reform necessary to create a true Union. Attempts to reform EU institutions and procedures, increase transparency, review practices, and engage citizens are all essential. However, we must be careful to support reforms that actively contribute to a more European union, not merely that show the appearance of progress. Transnational lists give the impression of a European choice; however, they do not provide citizens with more power, do not give them a say in the choice of their leaders, do not bring representatives closer to the people, do not change who chooses candidates and leads campaigns, and therefore do not lead to a more European message. They will, however, favour larger States and stifle reform. In order to achieve real progress, let us humbly take a page from other democracies and have the courage to care first about our goal — the creation of a true European democracy — even, and especially, when this means dismantling age-old political structure we have grown accustomed to.