

RESEARCH OUTPUTS / RÉSULTATS DE RECHERCHE

Explaining the reform of the Europarties' selection procedures for Spitzenkandidaten

Wolfs, Wouter; Put, Gert Jan; Van Hecke, Steven

Published in:

Journal of European Integration

DOI:

[10.1080/07036337.2021.1876687](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1876687)

Publication date:

2021

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (HARVARD):

Wolfs, W, Put, GJ & Van Hecke, S 2021, 'Explaining the reform of the Europarties' selection procedures for Spitzenkandidaten', *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 43, no. 7, doi: 10.1080/07036337.2021.1876687 , pp. 891-914. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1876687>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Explaining the Reform of the Europarties' Selection Procedures for Spitzenkandidaten

Wouter Wolfs, Gert-Jan Put and Steven Van Hecke

This is a manuscript of an article accepted for publication by Taylor & Francis in the Journal of European Integration on 23 December 2020, available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/07036337.2021.1876687>.

Abstract

This article examines how Europarties selected lead candidates (Spitzenkandidaten) for the 2019 European Parliament elections, and investigates why these parties changed or did not change their procedural processes compared with the previous 2014 election. As a set of external and internal factors incentivized Europarties to democratize their selections, the main hypothesis expects more inclusive procedures in 2019. The empirical analysis examines seven parties – EPP, PES, ALDE, EGP, PEL, ACRE and EFA – based on sixteen interviews with high-ranking party officials, internal party documents, and party websites. By leveraging analytical frameworks for the analysis of national parties we first provide a detailed account of these Europarties' selection procedures and subsequently present crucial factors explaining reforms (or lack thereof). The results show that mainly intra-party dissent hampered large democratic reforms. Our findings contribute to scholarly understanding of intra-party decision-making in Europarties, and have important consequences for the role of Europarties in future democratizing efforts of the EU.

1. Introduction

This article examines how Europarties selected lead candidates for the 2019 European Parliament elections, known as the Spitzenkandidaten system, and investigates why these parties changed or did not change their procedures compared with the 2014 election. We focus on the nature of these intra-party procedures, and more specifically on how and why Europarties have implemented reforms regarding the selection of their lead candidates. As the Spitzenkandidaten system was implemented for the first time in 2014 and a second time during the 2019 European elections, this allows for a very first cross-temporal comparison of these selection procedures.

Whereas in 2014 only five European political parties organized a selection process, these latest elections in 2019 led seven Europarties to put forward a lead candidate. Similar to the previous elections, the nomination of the Commission president became an object of conflict between the European Parliament and the European Council. However, while in 2014 Jean-Claude Juncker, the lead candidate of the European People's Party, became the Commission president, in 2019 Ursula von der Leyen, who had not been one of the lead candidates, emerged as the victor and took the reins of the Commission.

The Spitzenkandidaten system has already been studied under different scholarly angles, such as the salience of lead candidates for national political parties (Braun and Popa 2018; Braun and Schwarzbözl 2019), the organisation of EU-wide campaigns for lead candidates (Dinan 2015; Schmitt, Hobolt, and Popa 2015), news coverage of Spitzenkandidaten (Gattermann, De Vreese, and Van der Brug 2016; Schulze 2016), the impact on voter participation and vote choice (Hobolt 2014) and consequences for the inter-institutional balance of power in the EU (Christiansen 2016).

Scholarly work has not yet examined the intra-party dimension of the Spitzenkandidaten system. This article addresses an empirical gap by examining Europarties' selection procedures in the Spitzenkandidaten process over the last two European elections. More specifically, we analyse cross-temporal changes and explain why European political parties have (not) adapted their internal selections. As we identify a number of incentives for democratic reform, the central hypothesis is that Europarties have democratized their procedures to select a lead candidate. The empirical approach followed in this article adopts existing analytical frameworks of national parties' candidate selection processes (Barnea and Rahat, 2007; Hazan and Rahat, 2010).

Our study contributes to knowledge on the internal organization of Europarties. Candidate selection is often the object of a power struggle between various party factions (Hazan and Rahat 2010, 6–12). Day (2005) has identified that European political parties consist of several "streams" or factions that each hold a different opinion on how these Europarties should develop. Studying the evolution of candidate selection procedures of European parties thus expands our knowledge on the organisational development and internal power balance between these factions.

Moreover, the way selection procedures are organized also has an impact on the relations between actors in a political system. The normative assumption behind the Spitzenkandidaten system has been that it strengthens the legitimacy of the European Commission, since an electoral link is established between its leadership and European citizens. In this process, European political parties act as gatekeepers that (pre)select the range of options that voters can choose from (Gauja and Cross 2015, 288). Although voters in European elections are not primarily driven by lead candidates in their voting behaviour (Hobolt 2014; Schmitt, Hobolt, and Popa 2015), the selection of candidates remains an important object of study. Lead candidates matter for the European Council and in particular the European Parliament – the two institutions responsible

for determining who will lead the European Commission. Indeed, these candidates can become Commission president (as in 2014), or are at least the first to be considered for that position, or other top EU jobs (as in 2019).

The article focuses on the five Europarties that selected lead candidates for both the 2014 and the 2019 European elections: the European People’s Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE party), the European Green Party (EGP), and the Party of the European Left (PEL). In addition, we also analyse the selection procedures of the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) and the European Free Alliance (EFA), two Europarties that selected a lead candidate for the first time in 2019. The empirical analysis relies on data from a variety of sources: press statements, internal party documents and party websites, complemented with information from sixteen semi-structured interviews with high-ranking party officials and members of the party presidency.

2. An Analytical Framework for Party Reform at the EU Level

Since 2014, the Spitzenkandidaten system has constituted a new opportunity for Europarties to continue their development towards ‘normal’ and institutionalized party organizations (Bressanelli, 2014). This observation adds to the debate on whether Europarties can be analyzed using theories and approaches tailored to national political parties (Switek, 2016). Whereas some scholars have expressed reservations about the comparability of EU institutions more generally, a growing number of studies apply frameworks from national party research to European political parties (Bressanelli 2014; Kùlahci and Lightfoot 2014). We follow this line of research at the junction of party politics and European integration by applying an analytical framework of national parties’ candidate selection reforms to the situation of Europarties.

The recent literature on candidate selection is expansive, and focuses on selection process determinants (e.g. Lundell, 2004) or their consequences for various political phenomena (e.g. Shomer et al. 2016). Changes in candidate selection processes are also being discussed in the broader line of research on intra-party reforms (e.g. van Haute & Gauja, 2015). In order to analyse the changes of Europarties’ selection procedures and the factors driving these reforms, we will apply the analytical framework proposed by Barnea and Rahat (2007), in which a wide range of possible driving factors are identified. Its applicability is not limited to countries with a specific type of electoral or party system, but can be used for a variety of political systems. As such, the framework can also be applied in the context of the EU political system.

Barnea and Rahat (2007) argue that reforms of candidate selection procedures can be explained by developments at three levels: the political system, the party system, and the political party (Table 1).

Table 1: Reform of the Spitzenkandidat Selection Procedures by Europarties: Analytical Framework (adapted from Barnea and Rahat, 2007)

	Political System Level	Party System Level	Intra-Party Level
Focal point	General cultural, social and political environment of the EU	Interactions between European political parties	Interactions between groupings within the Europarty
Unit(s) of analysis	Norms and conventions	Parties as unitary actors	Intra-party groupings
Contribution to explanation	Direction of reform	Timing of reform	Outcome of reform
Possible relevant factors	- Democratization - Personalization	- Damage to the party’s public image	- Leadership change

- Inter-institutional dynamics	- Electoral competition	- Power struggles within party - Party change (merger or split)
--------------------------------	-------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------

The level of the political system comprises the general political context, and the norms and conventions of power distribution. Factors such as democratization or personalization of politics are expected to push parties in a certain substantive *direction* regarding their reforms. In other words, parties are expected to adopt reforms that reflect “the spirit of the time” (Barnea and Rahat 2007, 378). The second level is the party system level, which refers to the competition between parties, and is assumed to mainly have an effect on the *timing* of conducted reforms. Changes to candidate selection procedures can be triggered by inter-party competitive factors, such as electoral loss or the emergence of new competitors. Parties might also replicate reforms of other parties, if these are considered successful. Third, at the intra-party level, internal struggles can lead to the reform of candidate selection methods. Such conflict occurs between different personal entourages, ideological subgroups, generations or any other type of party factions. These intra-party groups might support or oppose certain reforms, depending on their own interests, and as such influence the *outcome* of any initiated reforms (Barnea and Rahat 2007, 378–379; Hazan and Rahat 2010, 11).

The key question tackled in this contribution is how and why Europarties have changed their internal selections for lead candidates. The procedures applied in 2019 can be less democratic, identical to or more democratic than the procedures designed in 2014. As we will explain below, a number of external and internal factors have created incentives for democratic reform of Europarties’ candidate selection procedures. Therefore, our main hypothesis states that *European political parties have democratized their internal procedures to select a lead candidate.*

The external factors refer to the level of the political system. First, the successful implementation of the Spitzenkandidaten system in 2014 can be considered a relevant factor as it led to the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker as European Commission President. We assume that this precedent has altered the norms and conventions at the EU level regarding the nomination of the Commission presidency. Although the president of the European Council Donald Tusk expressed reservations about the Spitzenkandidaten system, both the European Parliament and the European Commission signified explicit support for the lead candidate process on multiple occasions and urged the European political parties to select a Spitzenkandidat (European Commission, 2017, 2018; European Parliament, 2018). As the system provides an opportunity for European political parties to strengthen their position and legitimacy in the EU’s political system, we expect that these Europarties would contribute to the institutionalization and consolidation of this Spitzenkandidaten system by investing time and resources to further develop their selection procedures.

Second, as the model of Barnea and Rahat assumes that the factors on the political system level have an impact on the *direction* of reforms, we expect a process of democratization of the selection procedures. Not only is the underlying rationale of the Spitzenkandidaten system one of making the appointment of the Commission President more democratic, the EU institutions also urged European political parties to democratize their selection procedures. In a communication in February 2018, the European Commission stated that the lead candidate process could be improved if the Europarties would organize primary elections (European Commission 2018, 3-5). Around the same time, the European Parliament called on the European political parties to “nominate their ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ through an open, transparent and

democratic competition” (European Parliament, 2018). Consequently, the political context provides an important incentive for the Europarties to democratize their selection procedures.

The internal conditions can also be considered to be favorable for democratic reform. The Europarties had more time in 2019 to develop their procedures. In 2014, the Spitzenkandidaten system was implemented for the first time and the parties had to organize their selection at short notice. As a result, the procedures were put in place relatively late and were to a large extent copied from the leadership selection procedures (Put et al. 2016). In the run up to the European elections of 2019, the Europarties had more time to prepare their selection process and they could build on their experiences of previous elections. As more inclusive selection procedures require more resources in terms of work, time and finances (see e.g. Gherghina, 2013), the 2019 electoral process provided more favorable conditions for democratic reform.

3. Reforms to the Selection Procedures of European Political Parties

In order to examine the procedural reforms of Europarties, we look at the timing and modalities of selection procedures. We apply the four dimensions of the seminal model developed by Hazan and Rahat (2010): candidacy, selectorate, decentralization and voting/appointment procedure. In line with our main hypothesis, we expect a democratization of these dimensions in 2019 compared to the selection procedures for the lead candidates in 2014. Following Hazan and Rahat (2010), this implies that candidacy requirements become more inclusive, which entails fewer restrictions to become the Europarty’s Spitzenkandidat. Similarly, we expect a more inclusive selectorate in 2019, comprised of all party members or even the electorate. A democratized selection procedure would also mean stronger decentralization in the sense that the sub-levels of a party would have more influence on candidate selection. Finally, a voting procedure is more democratic than an appointment procedure in which the candidate is (pre)selected by the party leadership (with a possible ratification by vote). In addition, a voting procedure that demands a broader party support is considered more democratic.

However, the empirical analysis brings no strong evidence for this expected trend of stronger democratization (Table 2). All examined European political parties either did not change their procedures, or made them in various ways substantially more exclusive.

Table 2: Changes to the Selection Procedures of Europarties’ Commission President candidates, from 2014 to 2019 (see online supplemental material for complete table)

	EPP	PES	ALDE Party	EGP	PEL
Candidacy	Support by own national party + max. two other member parties IDENTICAL	Nomination by member party + support of 25% of full member parties. MORE EXCLUSIVE	Contribute to balanced team in terms of geography, gender, age and ideology. MORE EXCLUSIVE	Nomination by member party + support of min. five additional member parties MORE EXCLUSIVE	Contribute to balanced duo in terms of gender, geography and profession MORE INCLUSIVE
Selectorate	EPP delegates at congress IDENTICAL	PES delegates at congress IDENTICAL	ALDE Party Council Members MORE EXCLUSIVE	EGP Council Members MORE EXCLUSIVE	EL Executive Board Members MORE EXCLUSIVE
Decentralization	Number of votes for member parties: three + number depending on result in last European election IDENTICAL	Number of votes for member parties based on party strength in national parliament, EP and country size IDENTICAL	Number of votes for member party at Council based on result in last national or European elections IDENTICAL	Number of votes for member party at Council based on party result in last national or European elections MORE DECENTRALIZED	Equal number of votes for each member party IDENTICAL
Appointment or voting Procedure	Absolute majority of valid votes by EPP delegates (abstentions not valid) IDENTICAL	Absolute majority of valid votes by PES delegates (in two rounds if necessary) IDENTICAL	Approved by acclamation REDUCED SUPPORT (APPOINTMENT)	Absolute majority of votes (in multiple rounds if necessary) BROADER SUPPORT	Simple majority with majority of members present IDENTICAL

Timing	November 2018 EARLIER	February 2019 IDENTICAL	March 2019 LATER	November 2018 EARLIER	January 2019 LATER
Outcome	- Manfred Weber - Alexander Stubb	- Frans Timmermans - Maros Sefcovic	- Nicola Beer - Emma Bonino - Violeta Bulc - Katalin Cseh - Luis Garicano - Guy Verhofstadt - Margrethe Vestager	- Bas Eickhout - Ska Keller - Petra De Sutter - Atanas Schmidt	- Nico Cué - Violeta Tomic

European People's Party

The selection procedure of the EPP was not substantially changed between 2014 and 2019. Both in 2014 and 2019, candidates required the formal support of their own national party and – in order to avoid a race for endorsements – a maximum of two additional member parties from other EU countries than the candidates’ country of origin (EPP, 2018a; 2018b, 3). Also regarding the electorate and the voting procedure, no substantial changes were made: the candidate that received the absolute majority of votes – not counting abstentions – of the delegates on the EPP’s electoral congress, was nominated as the EPP’s candidate for Commission President (EPP, 2018a; 2018b, 3; 2018c). The 2019 selection procedure was only altered by two temporal issues. First, the period between the opening of the candidatures and the vote on the electoral congress was made longer. Second, the entire time table was brought forward a couple of months. In 2014, the submission of candidacies opened on 13 February 2014 and Jean-Claude Juncker was selected at the EPP’s congress on 7 March 2014 (EPP, 2014a). In 2019, the submission of candidacies was opened on 6 September 2018 and the vote at the congress took place on 8 November 2018 (EPP, 2018a).

During the 2018-2019 process, two candidates gained the required support: EP group leader Manfred Weber, and former Finnish prime minister Alexander Stubb. Although formally candidates could only declare the support of their own party and a maximum of two additional parties, Manfred Weber secured many informal endorsements. Considering this substantial informal support and the large share of MEPs in the electorate, it is no surprise that Manfred Weber managed to win the nomination as EPP lead candidate fairly easy. On the electoral congress, 492 of the 619 valid votes (79.5%) were cast in support of Weber, and 127 delegates (20.5%) voted for Alexander Stubb (EPP, 2018d; Stolton & Fortuna, 2018).

Party of European Socialists

The PES did not substantially alter its selection procedure either between 2014 and 2019. In order to be considered as the Europarty’s Spitzenkandidat for 2014, a candidate had to be nominated by a full member party, and required the support of at least 15 percent – i.e. five additional – PES member parties (PES, 2011, 2). The subsequent selection procedure included two steps. First, all member parties had to determine internally which candidate(s) they supported. Second, the results of these internal procedures had to be ratified through a vote of the member party delegates at the PES congress (PES, 2011, 2-3). However, after the nomination stage, Martin Schulz, incumbent EP president, emerged as the sole candidate with the support of 22 of the 32 PES member parties (Mahony, 2013), and no competitive internal process in the member parties was organized. He was nominated as the PES Spitzenkandidat at the electoral congress on 1 March 2014 with 368 votes in favour, 2 against and 34 abstentions (Put et al, 2016, 15; PES, 2014, 1).

The 2019 process of the PES included two procedural reforms. The first change made the selection process more exclusive: the minimum level of support for potential candidates was

raised from 15 to 25 per cent of the member parties (PES, 2018a, 2). This higher threshold made it more difficult for potential candidates to be nominated. Two candidates were able to secure sufficient support: Frans Timmermans and Maros Sefcovic, both incumbent Vice-presidents of the European Commission. Nicolas Schmit, a third potential candidate, fell below the threshold of 25 per cent (Interview B; Interview H), and former Chancellor of Austria, Christian Kern, announced his intention to run but withdrew from the race before the submission deadline (Gotev 2018; Petitjean 2018). On 5 November 2018, Sefcovic dropped out of the race and endorsed Frans Timmermans (PES, 2018b), after support among the member parties for Timmermans appeared to be more substantial (Interview B; Interview H).

The second procedural change had the potential to make the selection more inclusive. As in 2014, each member party could use its own internal procedure to determine which candidate(s) it supported, but a provision was introduced that explicitly allowed the use of internal or open primaries.¹ These internal processes would be held on a common “PES European election day” and the results ratified at the electoral congress (PES, 2018a, 1-3). However, since there was only one candidate left in the race, there was no need for member parties to initiate their internal procedures. During the electoral congress on 22-23 February 2019, Frans Timmermans was officially elected as the PES’ lead candidate.

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party

The ALDE Party substantially changed its procedure in the run-up to the 2019 European elections, but not in the direction of stronger democratization. In 2014, no specific selection procedure to nominate a Spitzenkandidat had been included in the statutes, and the modalities were largely copied from the process to elect the ALDE Party President. Two candidates came forward: former Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt and European Commissioner Olli Rehn. According to the formal procedure, a candidate required the absolute majority of votes of the ALDE delegates at the electoral congress. However, instead of a competitive vote, a compromise was brokered: Guy Verhofstadt became the ALDE Party’s candidate for the presidency of the European Commission and Olli Rehn for one of the other senior EU positions. The deal was approved by the congress delegates with almost 80 per cent of the votes (ALDE Party, 2014; Put et al., 2016, 15-16).

Despite the mixed experience, this *ad hoc* selection procedure was codified in the statutes in 2015 and further discussed during subsequent ALDE Party Council meetings (ALDE Party, 2015a, 5; 2015b, 4-5; Interview C). However, in the run-up to the 2019 elections, the ALDE Party refrained from using the same procedure. During the Council Meeting in Madrid in November 2018, the formal decision was taken to conduct an electoral campaign with a group of candidates. Party President Hans van Baalen received the mandate to compose this “Team Europe” that had to be balanced in terms of gender, geography, seniority and ideological background (Interview C; Interview F; Interview M; ALDE Party, 2018). President van Baalen contacted several potential candidates and consulted with the liberal prime ministers (Interview C; Interview F). Some liberal politicians declined – such as Vera Jourova from the Czech Republic, Christian Lindner from Germany, and Albert Rivera from Spain (Interview F) – resulting in the following group of seven candidates: Nicola Beer (Germany, FDP), Emma Bonino (Italy, Più Europa), Violeta Bulc (Slovenia, SMC), Katalin Cseh (Hungary, Momentum), Luis Garicano (Spain, Ciudadanos), Guy Verhofstadt (Belgium, Open VLD) and Margrethe Vestager (Denmark, Radikale Venstre). The proposed Team was formally endorsed by acclamation by the ALDE Party Council in March 2019 (Interview F;

¹ The use of internal primaries was also possible in 2014, although the result had to be ratified by an elected party body. The 2019 procedure included a much more explicit and detailed reference to the use of primaries.

Interview G; ALDE Party, 2019b). Consequently, procedural changes led to a more exclusive and centralized procedure as the party leadership now controlled the selection process (the President in consultation with liberal prime ministers). The impact of the Party Council was relatively limited as only the entire Team (and not individual candidates) could be considered, and the decision had to be taken during a limited time frame of two months prior to the European elections.

European Green Party

In line with the EGP's shared leadership tradition, the Europarty opted for a Spitzenkandidaten duo. In 2014, the EGP had conducted the most inclusive selection procedure. The Europarty organized an EU-wide, online primary, open to all citizens aged 16 or above that supported the green political platform (EGP, 2013c, 2). In order to be part of the primary choices, candidates had to be nominated by their national party, and subsequently secure the support of at least four and maximum eight member parties (EGP 2013a; 2013b; 2013c). Six green politicians were nominated; four nominees contested in the online primary. On 29 January 2014, the results were announced: Ska Keller and José Bové received the most votes and became the EGP's Spitzenkandidaten duo for the 2014 elections (EGP, 2014a; 2014c, 2).

With regard to the 2019 elections, the EGP made its selection procedure substantially more exclusive. The instrument of an open primary was abandoned, and instead the candidates were selected by the member parties. First, a candidate – including potentially a non-member – had to be proposed by a member party by 14 September 2018. Four candidates entered the race: Petra De Sutter, nominated by Groen (Belgium), Bas Eickhout by GroenLinks (Netherlands), Ska Keller by Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Germany) and Atanas Schmidt by Zelena Partija (Bulgaria) (EGP, 2018d). Subsequently, candidates had two weeks to gain the endorsement of five additional member parties. Support for Atanas Schmidt fell below the threshold of six member parties (EGP, 2018e). The eventual selection of the Spitzenkandidaten duo was the prerogative of the EGP member parties and was completed much earlier compared to 2014: during the Council meeting at the end of November 2018. A candidate required an absolute majority of votes in order to get elected compared to a relative majority in 2014 (EGP, 2018c, 1). Ska Keller finished first with more than 50 per cent of the votes in the second round. In the run-off for the second lead candidate position, Bas Eickhout won 62 per cent of the vote against Petra De Sutter (Posaner, 2018; Interview D).

Party of the European Left

Both in 2014 and 2019, the selection process in the PEL was rather *ad hoc*, as no formal procedure was developed. For the 2014 campaign, the decision to put forward a Spitzenkandidat was made by the Council of Chairpersons, which consists of the leaders of the member parties, during its meeting in Madrid in October 2013 (Put et al, 2016, 16). There was only one candidate: Alexis Tsipras, President of Syriza and Vice-President of the PEL. His candidacy was confirmed by the Council of Chairpersons by consensus and presented to a vote at the Europarty's congress in Madrid on 15 December 2013. Of the 164 delegates of the member parties, 84 per cent voted in favour, 7 per cent against and 9 per cent abstained (PEL, 2013).

In 2019, a similar process was followed. The PEL only agreed at the end of 2018 to participate in the Spitzenkandidaten system (Interview J; PEL, 2018). The Europarty decided to put forward two lead candidates; a practice that was common in several PEL member parties (Interview I; Interview J). However, in contrast to Alexis Tsipras in 2014, there was no "natural" candidate to lead the electoral campaign, due to a lack of strong and well-known politicians linked to the PEL (Schwartz, 2020, 82). A second Tsipras candidacy was not considered, since his government's

policies in Greece were viewed critically among PEL's member parties (Interview I, Interview J). PEL President Gregor Gysi informally contacted several persons to become the Europarty's lead candidate, including French economist Thomas Piketty and the mayor of Naples Luigi de Magistris, but they declined (Interview I). Eventually, two candidates were put forward which resembled a balanced 'ticket' in terms of gender, geography and profession: Violeta Tomić from the Slovenian Left Party and Nico Cué, a trade unionist from Belgium (PEL, 2019). All national member parties were informed about the decision and could have used their veto, but none did (Interview I). The two candidates were officially approved on 26-27 January 2019 by the Executive Board, which brings together delegates of the member parties (PEL, 2019). Consequently, the selectorate was more exclusive in 2019: while in 2014 Alexis Tsipras had been voted at the electoral congress, the highest political body of the Europarty, the two lead candidates in 2019 were merely approved by the PEL Executive Board.

The 2019 first-time participants: Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe and European Free Alliance

The successful implementation of the Spitzenkandidaten system in 2014 led both ACRE and EFA to recruit a lead candidate for the 2019 elections. Compared with the five other parties, ACRE and EFA started with a blank slate, therefore allowing their party elites more freedom and flexibility while designing selection procedures.

Although being a EU-critical party with strong reservations about the Spitzenkandidaten system, ACRE decided to participate in 2019 to bring across their views on the future of the EU. Whereas the selected candidate, Jan Zahradil, had a clear partisan affiliation to ACRE, the adopted selection procedure was to a large extent designed at the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) political group level (Interview O). The goal was to end up with a candidate supported across all segments of the Group, including the non-ACRE affiliated members. Candidates had to be nominated first by either ACRE, the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) or at least two MEPs from the ECR Group from two different countries, and additionally by their own national political party (ECR, 2018). Subsequently, the ECR envisaged a voting procedure where all MEPs cast a vote by secret ballot to decide on a lead candidate (ECR, 2018). Jan Zahradil was the only formally nominated candidate and therefore designated as the Spitzenkandidat, representing the entire ECR Group.

Similar to ACRE, the EFA party elite refrained from nominating a candidate in 2014 as the party had reservations about the Spitzenkandidaten system. Nevertheless, given its successful implementation, the EFA considered the 2019 edition of the process as an opportunity to draw public attention to political issues of central interest to their member parties, such as the Catalan and Scottish cause (EFA 2018b; Interview P). The requirements to become lead candidate nominee included the endorsement by the candidate's own member party, as well as by at least five other EFA parties (EFA, 2018b). Subsequently, the EFA Bureau was entitled to either validate or revoke candidacies that were not deemed suitable with an absolute majority of the votes. Apart from EFA lead candidate Oriol Junqueras, a second candidate that received the necessary endorsements was not considered fit for the position of lead candidate (Interview P). Therefore, it was the EFA Bureau that operated as the party selectorate in practice, after which the EFA General Assembly ratified the nomination of Junqueras in March 2019.

4. Explaining Reforms (or lack thereof) to Selection Procedures

After careful examination of the Europarties' procedural approach for selecting lead candidates, we now turn to a detailed analysis of the explanatory factors driving the (lack of) reforms between 2014 and 2019. For each of the parties under consideration, the conducted semi-

structured interviews and party documents fuel the identification of factors at the political system, party system and intra-party level (Barnea and Rahat, 2007).

European People's Party

The developments of the selection procedure in the EPP can be explained by an intra-party factor: the strong reservations among the EPP government leaders about the Spitzenkandidaten process. Despite the fact that in 2014 the EPP's candidate Jean-Claude Juncker was elected as EC president, some of the strongest opposition against his nomination originated from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, both members of the EPP (Hobolt, 2014, 1537). In order to safeguard the Spitzenkandidaten system, the principles of the 2014 selection procedure were codified in the Europarty's statutes in 2015 (EPP, 2015, 9-10; Interview A). All member parties – with the exception of the Swedish Moderate Party and Fidesz from Hungary – supported a continuation of the Spitzenkandidaten process (Interview A; Interview N).

The reservations of the EPP government leaders also explain the extension of the selection procedure in 2018-2019. The longer time between the opening of candidacies and the vote at the electoral congress allowed for a stronger involvement of the heads of government. The two candidates – Manfred Weber and Alexander Stubb – were received at the EPP summit on 17 October 2018 in Brussels (EPP, 2018d), in an attempt to grow support among government leaders for the Spitzenkandidaten process in general, and the EPP's lead candidate in particular (Interview A, Interview N). Manfred Weber also sought the explicit endorsement of the EPP government leaders (Interview A, Interview N), which he received from all except for Victor Orban (de La Baume, 2018).

Party of the European Socialists

In the PES, the Spitzenkandidaten process of 2014 was positively evaluated, and the internal selection procedure for the 2019 elections was again prepared by a "Working Group Common Candidate" consisting of delegates from all member parties (PES, 2017), and approved by the PES Presidency in June 2018 (PES, 2018a). The main change of the procedure – the raised threshold of 25 per cent of the member parties' support to be eligible as a candidate – was the result of an intra-party factor. It was done to make sure that only "serious" candidates that already enjoyed substantial support within the Europarty would put forward their candidature. This would limit the risk of a fierce (and thus damaging) internal contest, and ensured a lead candidate that was uncontested within the Europarty (Interview B).

The second alteration to PES' selection procedure was the possibility for member parties to organize internal or open primaries to determine support for the various candidates. This change was the result of an intra-party compromise. The use of primaries had been put forward by the southern delegations within the PES (mainly Italy and Spain) (Interview B; Interview H). However, many of the other delegations were reluctant to use it on an EU-wide scale or even to make it the mandatory selection mechanism for every member party's position. To ensure that member parties retained some degree of control over the selection process (Interview B; Interview H), the use of primaries was introduced as a possibility, but not as an obligation. However, since only one candidate remained, the PES did not organize a Europe-wide Election Day. This had the added benefit of avoiding some member parties that were likely to not endorse Frans Timmermans, which would highlight party disunity (Interview B).

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party

Although the ALDE party considered to democratize the selection procedure – including an open online primary system or a model mirroring the US primaries (Interview C) – the Europarty eventually opted for an informal and exclusive process in which the Party President composed a group of seven candidates that was endorsed by the Party Council. This can be explained by a combination of both inter-party and intra-party factors.

Two inter-party factors contributed to the procedural reform. First, the perception existed among ALDE Party delegates that the Spitzenkandidaten system entailed an advantage for the two largest Europarties (and in particular the EPP), since the dominant interpretation was that the biggest party family should be entitled to the Commission Presidency (Interview C; Interview F; De La Baume, 2018b). In the course of 2018, an increasing number of ALDE delegates voiced their concerns about nominating only one lead candidate, as this would create a strategic disadvantage compared to the two biggest Europarties EPP and PES (Interview C; Interview F). A catalytic element in this respect was the rejection of transnational lists by the European Parliament in February 2018 (Hardy, 2018), a proposal that enjoyed substantial support among the liberal parties. Many shared the position that a Spitzenkandidaten system without transnational lists would mean that the ALDE Party would be locked in a system that was designed to benefit the EPP (Interview C; Interview F; Interview M; De La Baume, 2018b).

A second inter-party factor was the opportunity of a structural cooperation with *La République En Marche* (LREM) of French President Emmanuel Macron. Leading members of the ALDE Party had regularly expressed their aspiration to bring LREM in the liberal family (De La Baume, 2018b; Marchand, 2018; Maurice, 2017). Macron and his party had fiercely spoken out against the Spitzenkandidaten system, calling it “a real democratic anomaly” (De La Baume, 2018a; Herszenhorn and De La Baume, 2018). Opting for a group of candidates instead of one Spitzenkandidat prevented the ALDE Party from antagonizing LREM and left open the possibility for a structural collaboration (Plümer and Goldmann, 2020, 57; Interview F; Interview G; Interview M). In this respect, President van Baalen also aimed to include Astrid Panosyan – one of the co-founders of LREM – in the ALDE Party’s team of lead candidates, but was turned down (Interview F).

The internal differences among the liberal member parties constituted an important intra-party factor. While the more federalist member parties supported the idea of the Spitzenkandidaten system, the more intergovernmental-oriented parties were sceptical (Interview F; Interview G; for a similar discussion on the 2014 elections, see Garcia and Priestley, 2015, 71). The liberal prime ministers also held reservations about the concept of lead candidates (Interview C; Interview F). In addition, the ALDE Party is characterized by considerable ideological diversity (Plümer and Goldmann, 2020, 56-58; Wolfs and Van Hecke, 2019, 268-271). In 2013-2014, open discord between member parties was avoided by a compromise of the double Verhofstadt-Rehn candidacy (Interview F). In 2018, similar concerns existed about open conflict (Interview G). Selecting a team instead of one candidate allowed the party to show the “different faces of European liberalism [...] representing also the different political sides of [the ALDE] family” (Interview C).

These factors resulted in fundamental changes in the selection procedure, both regarding (1) the *outcome*, since a group of candidates was put forward instead of one Spitzenkandidat; and (2) the *process*, that was steered by the party president and – indirectly – the liberal prime ministers. The selection of a “Team Europe” instead of one lead candidate weakened the legitimacy of the entire Spitzenkandidaten system and – consequently – also the candidate of the EPP, but ensured liberal participation (and visibility) in the various debates (Interview C). In addition, nominating a group

of candidates prevented that possible collaboration with Macron's LREM was jeopardized, and even allowed for the possibility to include a French candidate in the liberal team. Finally, the informal process led by the Party president avoided that the internal divisions between the different factions would result in open conflict; putting forward several candidates from various backgrounds embodied a compromise between member parties.

European Green Party

The substantial change in modalities of the EGP's selection procedure was the result of an intra-party factor. The open online primary was positively evaluated by the Europarty, although the participation rate was rather low (EGP, 2014b; 2014c; Interview D; Interview K). For the 2019 elections, the use of an open online primary was put forward again by the EGP Committee (Interview L). However, the proposal enjoyed only limited support among the member parties as they primarily wanted to focus on domestic issues in the campaign; an EU-wide primary did not provide much added value in this respect (Interview D; Interview L). In other words, most national parties wanted to maintain ownership over their electoral campaign and were rather reluctant towards a strong involvement from the EGP, a trend that Switek and Weissenbach (2020, 68-72) also encountered with regard to campaign communication and political platform positions in the run-up to the 2019 elections.

Since no online primary would be held, a new procedure had to be developed. As had been the case in 2014, the new selection procedure was proposed by the EGP Committee and subsequently adopted by the EGP Council in May 2018 (EGP, 2018a). The new process resembled the existing selection procedure for members of the EGP committee: candidates had to be nominated by a member party, required the support from additional member parties and had to be elected with an absolute majority of the EGP Council members (EGP, 2017, 20). Compared to the 2014 procedure, the minimum threshold was increased from four to five member parties. This was seen as a good balance between keeping it sufficiently low to foster the participation of as many candidates as possible on the one hand, and preventing individuals to participate simply to advance their own career on the other hand (Interview D; Interview K; Interview L).

The change of timing of the entire election procedure can be explained by a combination of inter-party and practical factors. The process was scheduled earlier in anticipation of the nomination by the EPP and PES in November and December 2018 respectively, since it was considered important to elect the green Spitzenkandidaten during the same period (Interview D). In practical terms, a Council meeting was already scheduled for that period; organising an additional meeting or congress early 2019 would put a financial burden on the EGP (Interview D; Interview L).

Party of the European Left

The fact that there was no formal procedure developed in the PEL, and that the selection was made more exclusive can be explained by an intra-party factor: a division between the member parties about the concept of the Spitzenkandidaten system. In the second half of 2018, there was a strong debate between pro-EU and EU-critical member parties whether or not the PEL should put forward a lead candidate. This has been a traditional cleavage (Schwartz, 2020, 80-83), as some members want the PEL to develop into a genuine European party, while others do not want it to develop beyond an alliance of national parties. Although the latter group does not include many proponents of the Spitzenkandidaten system, they eventually agreed by the end of 2018 to put forward a lead candidate duo (Interview I, Interview J). This left little time to develop a formal selection procedure, and explains the *ad hoc* search for two Spitzenkandidaten. Similarly, the two lead candidates were approved by the Executive Board, because the time frame was too short to organize an extra-ordinary congress (Interview J).

Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe and European Free Alliance

Even though both ACRE and EFA had reservations about the Spitzenkandidaten system in principle, their party elites considered capitalizing on the attention paid to the lead candidates more desirable than staying out of the race altogether (Interview O; Interview P). While the first participation of ACRE and EFA provided them with greater flexibility in designing selection procedures, the set of considerations taken into account was more limited. The formal procedures adopted by ACRE and EFA served the sole purpose of nominating a lead candidate in an efficient and inexpensive manner. Inclusiveness in terms of the party electorate and engaging European citizens for the Spitzenkandidaten system was of less significance.

Particularly the case of the EFA fits the expectation of a short and straightforward procedure, as the selection of Junqueras by the Bureau presented the most exclusive case in the Europarty landscape. The selection of the ACRE lead candidate, interestingly, took place at the ECR Group level and its design was strongly affected by concerns regarding intra-party divisiveness (Interview O). Here again, it seems that intra-party factors constitute the main determinants for the lead candidate selection's procedure.

5. Conclusion

This article examined how Europarties selected lead candidates for the 2019 elections, and investigated why these parties changed or did not change their procedures compared with the previous 2014 elections. We expected a trend towards stronger democratization for two reasons. Firstly, the European Commission and the European Parliament had urged Europarties to make their internal decision-making processes more inclusive. Secondly, Europarties had more time and resources to develop their selection procedures. However, our empirical analysis does not provide any evidence of democratization. Compared with 2014, most aspects of Europarties' selection procedures either did not change, or became more exclusive.

The results show that mainly intra-party dissent explains the lack of democratic reforms to the selection procedures. European parties consist of several groupings and show substantial internal heterogeneity that hampers democratic reforms in different ways. In some parties, these factions are divided on the principle of the Spitzenkandidaten system (as in the case of the EPP, the ALDE Party and the PEL) or on the involvement of citizens in the selection process (as in the case of the PES) and no consensus could be reached on a more inclusive procedure. Other Europarties are characterized by ideological differences between factions, and avoid a more open procedure to limit the risk of a fierce internal contest that could jeopardize party unity (as in the case of the PES and the ALDE party). The latter concern also triggered ACRE, which nominated a lead candidate for the first time in 2019, to agree with a procedure coordinated at the ECR Group level where other segments of their political group (e.g. ECPM) were granted co-ownership of the process. In addition, democratization is impeded by member parties that want to maintain some degree of control over the process (as in the case of the PES and the EGP). In all Europarties under analysis, these intra-party factors are an important part of the explanation for changes or lack thereof to the selection procedures. Inter-party factors also played a role, mainly with regard to the timing of the procedure (as in the case of the EGP), or in raising scepticism about the concept of the Spitzenkandidaten system (as in the case of the ALDE Party).

These findings have implications for the organisational development of European political parties. Previous research identified how candidate selection could be an important instrument to turn Europarties into "representative vehicles for an emerging European demos" (Day, 2005, 63). Opening up selection procedures changes the nature of party organisations and shifts the internal balance of power. However, those factions within Europarties that favour the

organisational status quo and resist a development towards a mass-party type were dominant. In organisational terms, European political parties remain to a large extent umbrella organisations of their national member parties. A democratization of the selection procedures is unlikely to be initiated from *within* the European political parties.

These findings also have normative consequences for the democratization of the European Union. The introduction of a Spitzenkandidaten system has been motivated as a means to democratize the EU by providing a popular mandate for the European Commission president. The internal selection procedures of Europarties need not be inclusive to democratise the EU in general. However, previous research has shown that the electoral impact of the Spitzenkandidaten system remains limited. This lack of a strong electoral connection could be partly compensated by open and democratic selection procedures, which can be an important instrument to involve citizens in the internal decision-making of European political parties. Democratically organized selections might lead to more media attention for lead candidates and European elections in general, and higher levels of satisfaction with the way European politics is played out. Our analysis shows that none of the analysed Europarties have tapped this potential.

The nomination of Ursula von der Leyen – who was not one of the lead candidates of the Europarties – as president of the European Commission has raised even more fundamental doubts about the Spitzenkandidaten system (Wolfs et al., 2020). This is particularly noteworthy, since the members of the two main institutions that determine who will be at the helm of the Commission – the heads of state and government in the European Council, and the Members of European Parliament – had been intensively involved in the internal selection of their Europarties' lead candidates. Consequently, considering the findings of this study, it seems that only substantial developments at the political system level of the EU – such as introducing transnational lists or institutionalizing the role of Spitzenkandidaten – can provide a new impetus for the democratization of Europarties' selection procedures.

References

- Barnea, Shlomit and Rahat, Gideon (2007) Reforming candidate selection methods: a three-level approach. *Party politics*, 13(3): 375-394.
- Braun, Daniela and Popa, Sebastian (2018) This time it was different? The salience of the Spitzenkandidaten system among European parties. *West European Politics*, 41(5): 1125–1145.
- Braun, Daniela and Schwarzbözl, Tobias (2019) Put in the spotlight or largely ignored? Emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten by political parties in their online campaigns for European elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(3): 428–445.
- Bressanelli, Edoardo (2014) *Europarties after enlargement: organization, ideology and competition*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Christiansen, Thomas (2016) After the Spitzenkandidaten: fundamental change in the EU's political system?. *West European Politics*, 39(5): 992–1010.
- Day, Stephen (2005) Developing a conceptual understanding of Europe's transnational political parties. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 13(1): 59–77.
- Dinan, Desmond (2015) Governance and institutions: the year of the Spitzenkandidaten. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53: 93–107.
- Gattermann, Katjana, De Vreese, Claes and van der Brug, Wouter (2016) Evaluations of the Spitzenkandidaten: the role of information and news exposure in citizens' preference formation. *Politics and Governance*, 4(1): 37-54.
- Gauja, Anika and Cross, William (2015) The influence of party candidate selection methods on candidate diversity. *Representation*, 51(3): 287–298.
- Hazan, Reuven and Rahat, Gideon (2010) *Democracy within parties: candidate selection methods and their political consequences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hobolt, Sara (2014) A vote for the President? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(10): 1528–1540.
- Külahci, Erol and Lightfoot, Simon (2014) Governance, Europarties and the challenge of democratic representation in the EU. *Acta Politica*, 49(1): 71-85.
- Lundell, Krister (2004) Determinants of candidate selection: The degree of centralization in comparative perspective. *Party politics*, 10(1): 25-47.
- Plümer, Sandra and Goldmann, Anne (2020) Künftige Königsmacher? Die Europawahl 2019 aus Sicht der Liberalen. In: Michael Kaeding, Manuel Müller and Julia Schmälter (eds.) *Die Europawahl 2019: Ringen um die Zukunft Europas*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 53-62.
- Put, Gert-Jan, Van Hecke, Steven, Cunningham, Corey and Wolfs, Wouter (2016) The choice of Spitzenkandidaten: A comparative analysis of the Europarties' selection procedures. *Politics and Governance*, 4(1): 9-22.
- Schmitt, Hermann, Hobolt, Sara and Popa, Sebastian Adrian (2015) Does personalization increase turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics*, 16(3): 347–368.

- Schulze, Heidi (2016) The Spitzenkandidaten in the European Parliament election campaign coverage in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. *Politics and Governance*, 4(1): 23-36.
- Schwartz, Michail (2020) With or Without EU: The radical left at the proof of the 2019 European elections. In: Michael Kaeding, Manuel Müller and Julia Schmälter (eds.) *Die Europawahl 2019: Ringen um die Zukunft Europas*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 53-62.
- Shomer, Yael, Put, Gert-Jan and Gedalya-Lavy, Einat (2016) Intra-party politics and public opinion: How candidate selection processes affect citizens' satisfaction with democracy. *Political Behavior*, 38(3): 509-534.
- Switek, Niko (2016) Inside the Europarty: research at the junction of party politics and European integration. *Journal of European Integration*, 38(6): 737-741.
- Switek, Niko and Weissenbach, Kristina (2020) An ever-closer party? The institutionalization of the European Green Party after the 2019 European election. In: Michael Kaeding, Manuel Müller and Julia Schmälter (eds.) *Die Europawahl 2019: Ringen um die Zukunft Europas*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 63-77.
- van Haute, Emilie and Gauja, Anika (2015) *Party members and activists*. New York: Routledge.
- Wolfs, Wouter and Van Hecke, Steven (2019) The liberals in Europe: The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe. In: Caroline Close and Emilie van Haute (eds.) *Liberal Parties in Europe*. New York: Routledge, 259-278.
- Wolfs, Wouter, Put, Gert-Jan and Van Hecke, Steven (2020) The second time around: Status quo and reform of the Europarties' selection procedures for Spitzenkandidaten in 2019. In Michael Kaeding, Manuel Müller and Julia Schmälter (eds.) *Die Europawahl 2019: Ringen um die Zukunft Europas*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 157-168.