

The Parliament of the European Union is the only transnational parliament in the world and the only EU body directly elected by citizens. This could make it the flagship of democracy in the EU. However, although the EP was founded in 1952 and the first direct election of EP members was held in 1979, we are still far away from a genuinely Europeanised political space in which all citizens across the Union can feel involved.

Historically, the European integration process has been considered a side topic in national states' public debates, even during EP elections. According to one longstanding interpretation, EP elections are no more than [elections of the second order](#), in which political actors campaign about national issues, rather than discussing common European matters. It has been highlighted, however, that in recent years, the era of ['permissive consensus' might have given way to one of 'constraining dissensus'](#). European integration has become politicised in elections and referendums, and the EU is becoming a more contested topic of discussion across Europe. **The EP elections of May 2019 could be a turning point: in many countries, the EU and its policies dominate domestic political debate.** Moreover, for the first time, we are faced with the possibility of anti-EU parties winning enough seats to potentially have a real impact on EP legislative activity.

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Nevertheless, even with political forces across Europe campaigning on EU issues, the question of whether these developments are triggering a real transnational debate is still open. To investigate the extent to which a European common debate is developing in the runup to the EP elections, I look at the issue from the online perspective. **I focus on the Twitter communications of actual members of the EP and try to shed light on whether, and to what extent, they interact with colleagues of different nationalities, creating (at least online) a transnational debate about the EU.**

EP countries' interactions

Since October, EuVisions has been tracking the [online activity of all MEPs](#) by collecting the tweets they send, as well as the reactions they receive in terms of retweets and replies. To tackle the issue of transnational debate, I separated interactions happening among MEPs from the same country from those that 'cross' national boundaries, i.e. which involve MEPs from different member states. Overall, **in three months of online activity, MEPs retweeted or replied to their colleagues' tweets 14,228 times, and less than one-fifth (17.5%) of these interactions happened 'across boundaries'**. If we look at how transnational conversations are distributed among nationalities, we can observe interesting differences (Chart 1).

Chart 1. Distribution of transnational conversations sent per EP country

In the first page of Chart 1, I plotted the distribution of national vs. transnational conversations in terms of number of retweets and replies. **As is reasonable to expect, larger countries are more present than smaller ones in both national and transnational interactions.** Polish MEPs are the ones sending the highest number of transnational interactions overall, followed by the Portuguese and the British, while at the bottom we find MEPS from Lithuania, Estonia and Luxembourg. However, larger countries are represented by a higher number of MEPs, which by itself implies more Twitter conversations. In the second page of the chart, I look at the relative percentage of national vs. transnational interactions in each country.

Even though only 20% of retweets and replies by German MEPs are directed towards foreign colleagues (Chart 1), Germany is one of the few member states whose MEPs receive more transnational interactions than national ones

Here the picture changes. MEPs from Eastern European countries are the ones who interacted the most with foreign colleagues. Among the first positions, we find Estonia and

Slovakia, whose MEPs had very few conversations, but all of them were directed at other countries' MEPs. The same is true of Hungary (79%) and Croatia (71%). The case of Portugal is interesting, as it couples a high percentage of transnational vs. national interactions (85%) with a non-negligible number of conversations. On the other hand, **MEPs from older member states tend to interact more frequently with colleagues from their own country (with the exceptions of the Czech Republic and Poland)**. French MEPs directed 97% of their interactions to their fellow nationals, followed in this by the British (92%) and the Spanish (88%). The suggested trend is twofold: MEPs from Eastern countries produce, on average, a small number of conversations, but they tend to interact more often across borders. Their colleagues from larger Western countries engage in smaller percentages of transnational conversation, but they contribute to the transnational debate to a greater extent.

To make the picture clearer, in Chart 2 I show the same interactions from a different perspective. This time, the histograms show the extent to which MEPs have been able to *attract* transnational interactions from their colleagues.

Chart 2. Distribution of transnational conversations received per EP country

Starting with the left graph, we see that German MEPs receive the most attention from MEPs of different nationalities, followed by the British and the Irish; at the bottom of the list, we find Latvia, Luxembourg and Cyprus. On the second page, I show the relative share of transnational vs. national interactions received by each country's MEPs. Polish, Spanish and French MEPs find themselves once again in the last positions, this time for receiving the lowest percentages of their foreign colleagues' retweets and replies.

In the last months, members of the ENF such as the Italian League and the French National Rally expressed their desire to create a unique group, which would include all the nationalist parties across Europe, in the runup to the EP elections. However, their communication does not clearly reflect this intent.

It seems, then, that we are observing a pattern similar to the one that emerges from Chart 1,

with large EU countries receiving the highest number of reactions from other countries' MEPs, and Eastern EU countries showing the highest percentages, but only a small number of conversations. The suggested correlation between the number of transnational interactions sent and received by MEPs has one notable exception, represented by Germany. **Even though only 20% of retweets and replies by German MEPs are directed towards foreign colleagues (Chart 1), Germany is one of the few member states whose MEPs receive more transnational interactions than national ones.** This could reflect Germany's leading position in the European integration process, and the recognition of this role by MEPs from other EU countries in their online interactions.

EP party interactions

As a third step, I repeat the process, this time from the perspective of the European Parliament parties. Data about interactions in Chart 3 are aggregated not by country, but on the basis of membership of EP parties.

Chart 3 - Distribution of the transnational conversations sent per EP party

Looking at the differences among EP groups, we find that **MEPs from the European People's Party are the most active in retweeting and replying to foreign colleagues in both graphs, followed by the Social Democrats in absolute value and by the leftist GUE/NGL in relative value.** The parties least likely to engage in transnational interactions are the nationalist forces, such as the EFDD and the ENF. In the last months, members of the ENF such as the Italian League and the French National Rally expressed their desire to create a [unique group](#), which would include all the nationalist parties across Europe, in the runup to the EP elections. However, their communication does not clearly reflect this intent. It seems that MEPs from these groups are not interested in debating across national boundaries, even with their foreign nationalist colleagues, which surely does not favour the creation of a common nationalist front.

Chart 4. Distribution of transnational conversations received per EP party

Chart 4 provides a picture of which EP parties are attracting the most transnational conversations, confirming the correlation between the number of transnational interactions sent and received. **EP Christian Democrats receive the highest number of transnational interactions both in absolute and relative values,** while in the bottom

positions we find, once again, the nationalist groups, suggesting that their influence is limited to national debates.

Topics of transnational discussions

The results of this preliminary exploration so far are mixed. **To assess the extent to which an actual transnational Europeanised political sphere is developing, the perspective cannot be limited to representatives in the EP without taking into account the people represented, that is to say, European citizens.** After all, even if MEPs were fully engaged in cross-border conversations, they could be completely detached from the public debate or discussing topics of no interest to the ordinary citizen. In Chart 5, I show a summary of the content of transnational interactions by plotting the most used hashtags in a word cloud.

Chart 5. Top 50 hashtags used in transnational interactions

Brexit has been at the core of the debate in the last weeks, and this is also true when it comes to MEPs' transnational interactions, as Chart 5 shows. **Besides Brexit, however, the other broad topic at the center of cross-country interactions is one that revolves around the organisation of EP groups and party congresses ([#epphelsinki](#), [#pesinlisbon](#)), while policy issues such as [#workingconditions](#), [#digitaleurope](#) or [#cybersecurity](#)—which could be of greater interest for EU citizens—are discussed only to a smaller extent.** Somewhere in between, we find the process of selection of the [#spitzenkandidat](#), which many considered an attempt to shorten the distance between European citizens and EU institutions while giving the EU Commission a democratic legitimacy.

Whether MEPs' transnational conversations are creating a Europeanised political space or engaging EU citizens' interests is still an open question. In the next chapter of our analysis, we will try to shed further light on the issue by looking at the process from the perspective of EU citizens and investigate their role in the creation of a common European transnational debate.

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