

# The Role of the European Parliament in EU Foreign Policy: Parliamentary Diplomacy and the Development of the EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly

**Sima Rakutiene**

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania, ORCID: 0000-0001-6459-5224,  
corresponding address: sima.rakutiene@vdu.lt

## **Abstract**

*This article examines the role of the European Parliament (EP) in EU foreign policy and parliamentary diplomacy through the lens of the social theory of functionalism. By focusing on the case of the EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, the study discusses the forms of diplomacy developed by the EP in its relations with the Eastern Partnership countries. The study is based on qualitative research, including involved documents analysis and semi-structured interviews (23) and conducts a three-tier analysis of, first, social interactions, second, cultural patterns and, third, individual MEPs motivations. The article argues that EP parliamentary diplomacy goes beyond its formal competencies and contributes to EU foreign policy aims. The research indicates that parliamentary diplomacy serves the functions of parliamentary scrutiny and of obtaining accessible information directly from parliamentarians and civil society representatives in Eastern partner countries. The Euro-Nest inter-parliamentary institution provides a platform for ongoing socialisation and regional cooperation. European parliamentary diplomacy and the focus on the EU's specific foreign policy agenda (Eastern Partnership) is also linked to the individual motives of MEPs themselves.*

**Keywords:** *parliamentary diplomacy, EuroNest, European Parliament, Eastern Partnership, Europeanisation*

*First published online on 31 March 2025, issue published on 31 March 2025*

## **Introduction**

Inter-parliamentary links have been increasing in recent decades, and the scholars stress that the involvement of legislatures, as well as other actors such as NGOs (Noutcheva 2015), in international issues should be encouraged (Kingah & Cofelice 2015) as it can contribute to reducing the ‘democratic deficit’ at the international level (Ruland & Carrapatoso 2015: 197).

Under the EU’s latest ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (2009), the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy remains at the disposal of the member states, with only the member states retaining their veto power. However, the role of the European Parliament (EP) has been significantly strengthened in international affairs, especially in the development of international trade and other international agreements (Servent 2014; Meislova 2021; Bressanelli, Chelotti & Lehmann 2019), and in the distribution of funding to meet the EU’s international programme objectives (Cardwell & Jančić 2019). Moreover, the European Parliament has for decades developed a network of inter-parliamentary assemblies (Luciano 2017; Petrova & Raube 2016), as well as bilateral inter-parliamentary relations with outside countries or regions (Vandecasteele 2015; Dri 2010). The EP also engaged in crisis management situations in foreign countries (Fonck 2018; Nitoiu & Sus 2016). All these tendencies show that the European Parliament is striving to become an active player in the development of EU foreign policy and is also contributing to the EU’s representation at international level.

This article analyses the European Parliament’s evolving diplomatic relations with the Eastern Partnership countries by focusing on the development and functions of the EuroNest interparliamentary assembly. The Eastern Partnership, as the EU’s external policy, was launched in 2009. The six Eastern European Neighbourhood countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – are formally part of the Partnership, but Belarus’ involvement has been very limited. The initiative aimed to build stronger economic and political relations with the post-Soviet countries, and from the outset proposed Europeanisation and integration without full membership in the European Union (Rakutienė 2014), requiring reforms linked to membership, and largely reflected the overall objectives of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP 2004). Both the individual EU member states and the neighbourhood countries participating in the partnership have long interpreted the initiative itself and its ultimate objectives differently. While some saw the EaP as a kind of pre-accession programme (the aspiring countries and the EU member states that strongly support it), for others it was perceived as no more than another format for cooperation. However, when in 2014 Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova signed association agreements and

DCFTAs and reached visa free agreements with the European Union, it raised the question and dilemma as to what the Partnership's further ambition could be. In 2022, following the Russian armed attack on Ukraine, the European Union took the political decision to offer the prospect of EU membership to Ukraine and Moldova (in 2022), and later to Georgia (in 2023). This raises the further question of the appropriateness of the Eastern Partnership and the involvement of these countries in the format of regional cooperation once they are already part of the EU's enlargement policy.

In the context of this new geopolitical reality (Kilic 2024) and 'resurgence of Russian imperialism' (Pertiwi 2024: 66), this study is particularly relevant as the future of the Eastern Partnership region is not yet clear and there is an intense geopolitical struggle between major international players, including the EU. This case examines the role and functions of one of the EU's institutional actors – the European Parliament – in the context of the implementation of the EU's Eastern Partnership. As the European Parliament is one of the EU's most important legislative bodies, as well as the EU's only directly elected institution, it is important to examine its forms and role in order to find answers to how it contributes to EU foreign policy and diplomacy. The study also offers a new analytical perspective in the context of the existing academic literature on parliamentary diplomacy (Vandecasteele 2015; Petrova & Raube 2016), by analysing the EP's diplomacy through a functionalist social theory approach. While previous studies have mainly analysed EuroNest inter-parliamentary Assembly through the theoretical lens of socialisation and institutionalism, the present study applies the social theory of functionalism, forming an analytical model based on three factors: a) social interactions, b) cultural patterns and c) individual motivation. Based on this theory, the article aims to explore the role of the European Parliament and its diplomatic forms in the EU's Eastern Partnership. How can the European Parliament contribute to the development of the EU's foreign policy through parliamentary diplomacy and what are the incentives for it to do so?

The paper first analyses the academic literature, grouping together research that highlights the role and contribution of the EP in specific areas of EU external policy and the legal limits of its competences. The analysis then turns to the social theory of functionalism which is applied to the case study of the EuroNest Assembly. The third part is based on a three-tier analysis linked to a theoretical model to find out: (a) how the EP develops social interactions with the Eastern Partnership countries and which actors are involved; (b) whether and which cultural models, norms and values underpin the cooperation; and (c) to what extent and why the MEPs' own individual motivations are important for the development of parliamentary diplomacy. The paper argues that EP parliamentary diplomacy goes beyond its formal competencies and contributes to EU foreign policy aims.

## **Literature review: The role of the EP in EU foreign policy and parliamentary diplomacy**

### *Legal competences of EP in external policies*

The role of the European Parliament in EU policies has steadily increased throughout the process of European integration (Grau i Segu 2019; Rakutienė & Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė 2020). Comparing research and academic discourse, a number of areas can be identified which analyse the role and influence of the European Parliament in the development of the EU's external relations (see Table 1). Under the legal competences of the European Parliament, as laid down in the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has an important legislative role (on par with the Council of the EU) in the approval of the EU budget and in the ratification of international agreements between the European Union and foreign countries. In these areas, the EP's legislative powers are symmetrical with those of the Council of the EU, as both institutions can reject a legislative act. Through these legislative and budgetary powers, the European Parliament generally seeks to increase its influence in EU foreign policy.

The European Parliament is directly involved in the distribution of EU funds to external regions and countries. These legislative powers of the European Parliament apply to development cooperation programmes (Cardwell & Jančić 2019) and to the allocation of EU funds in other policies (Kingah & Cofelice 2015). The budget approval procedure allows the European Parliament to bargain for the adoption of certain strategic EU foreign policy decisions and in the determination of the amount of funds allocated to them. Cardwell and Jančić (2019) concluded that the European Parliament has been able to significantly increase its role in development cooperation policy through the use of its budgetary powers and has increased its political influence in inter-institutional negotiations.

Another strand of research, which also highlights the increasing role of the EP, analyses the legal competences and influence of the European Parliament in international negotiations on trade agreements, association agreements or other international agreements with third countries through the consent procedure of the EU legislation. The high-profile case of the European Parliament's rejection of the EU-US SWIFT agreement in 2010 signalled to other countries the need to build and maintain a stronger relationship not only with the governments of the EU member states, but also with MEPs (Servent 2014). Ariadna Servent pointed out that this came as a great surprise to the EU's American partners, who had hoped that an agreement with the EU capitals would not lead to any major problems, but after the EP had rejected the original text of the treaty on the issue of data protection, renegotiations took place, and the US legislators came to the EP for negotiations (Servent 2014: 578). In this way, the EP has shown that its approval is not a given and that member states, including partner countries, need to pay more attention to the EP's position and to the negotiations with this

Table 1: The role of EP in shaping European external policies

Involvement	Legislative procedure within EU	Participants	Outcomes
Formal/Legally binding	Budget approval	European Parliament and EU Council	Legal Act Budget/fund allocations for EaP countries
Formal/Legally binding	Consent	European Parliament and EU Council	International agreements/Treaties- EU Association agreements with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia; Visa facilitation and Readmission agreements
Parliamentary diplomacy/ Legally non-binding	Consultation/none	MEPs and EaP MPs/Interparliamentary Assembly 'EuroNest'	Resolutions, institutionalisation, socialisation
Parliamentary diplomacy/ Legally non-binding	Consultation/none	MEPs and EaP MPs bilateral inter-parliamentary committees	Socialisation, exchange of information
Parliamentary diplomacy/ Legally non-binding	Consultation/none	MEPs and EaP MPs based on ideological ground- inter-party cooperations	Socialisation, exchange of information
Parliamentary diplomacy/ Legally non-binding	Consultation/none	MEPs, leaders, mediation missions	Mediation, crisis management

Source: Author

institution (Servent 2014). Similar studies on international negotiations (Meislova 2021), such as the Brexit process, have highlighted that MEPs have been very effective in strengthening their role in the negotiation process, taking part in key decisions throughout the process and even became 'quasi-negotiators' (Bressanelli, Chelotti & Lehmann 2019: 359).

The studies have thus identified the growing influence of the European Parliament in the European Union's international negotiations. These legislative and budgetary powers also encourage the European Parliament to become more involved in foreign policy processes and to develop a range of parliamentary

diplomacy tools – which enables them to build direct links with foreign partners (see Table 2).

*EP role beyond legal competences: Parliamentary diplomacy*

A growing body of academic literature and research examines the role of the EP in building relations with external partners through various forms of parliamentary diplomacy that have no real legal force and that go beyond the legal competences conferred on the EP by the EU Treaties (see Table 2 and Table 1). These forms of parliamentary diplomacy range from simply building diplomatic relations and networking to more impactful socialising and diplomatic missions in third countries (see Table 2). This field of study is a much less explored area of the EP’s role in foreign affairs than the formal, legislative powers as outlined above. Scholars stress that more attention should be paid to studying these diplomatic tools of the European Parliament and their impact (Stavridis & Irrera 2015; Dri 2015; Fonck 2018), explaining how European parliamentary diplomacy can contribute to the development of the EU’s foreign policy (Kingah & Cofelice 2015; Kostanyan & Vandecasteele 2015).

Table 2: Modalities and functions of parliamentary diplomacy: Literature review

Diplomacy	Parliamentary scrutiny	Institutionalisation	Socialisation	Mediation missions
exchange of information, creation of contacts and long-term links;	helps get information directly from foreign partners;	development of inter-parliamentary institutions, regular contacts, joint resolutions, positions;	Sharing, transferring or creating common norms, values, rules, practices;	mediation, crisis management missions where necessary.
Petrova and Raube 2016; Nitoiu and Sus 2016	Luciano 2017	Stavridis and Irrera 2015; Dri 2015	Kostanyan and Vandecasteele 2015	Fonck 2018; Nitoiu and Sus 2016

Source: Author

The European Parliament has set up a number of inter-parliamentary institutions to build foreign relations based on regional cooperation and multilateralism. Research on inter-parliamentary institutions tends to focus on the socialisation process as a determining factor (Kostanyan & Vandecasteele 2015), where the European Parliament builds relationships with delegates from non-EU countries

through multilateral parliamentary assemblies, aiming at democratisation and regional identity building (Luciano 2017). According to Luciano, such inter-parliamentary institutions become like a ‘moral tribunal’ for openly promoting and defending the values of democracy, human rights and freedoms (Luciano 2017: 320). Socialisation is interpreted as a kind of educational process that seeks to transport and transfer European norms, values and certain rules to partner countries (Kostanyan & Vandecasteele 2015). Such a process aims to socialise parliamentarians from other countries and to transfer European experiences. However, other authors stress that socialisation is not always successful and that, besides socialisation, other important factors in the development of an inter-parliamentary institution are institutionalisation and diplomacy, where the aim is simply to exchange information and build relations.

Clarissa F. Dri (2010), in analysing the EP’s relations with the Mercosur Parliament, highlighted the importance of the process of institutionalisation in explaining the extent to which the EP’s ‘institutional mimesis’ has taken place in an attempt to replicate some of the institutional elements of the EU’s integration model in the Latin American region. She stressed that the links with the EP had helped strengthen the parliamentary dimension and create a Mercosur Parliamentary Assembly that replicated certain European elements, but that this institutional engineering had also been subject to the limitations of the political culture of the region (Dri 2010). Irina Petrova and Kolja Raube (2016) analysed the case of the EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and concluded that institutionalisation, socialisation and parliamentary diplomacy are the main forces determining such cooperation, and that the latter is the most decisive factor in their view, while socialisation was limited. They argue that parliamentary diplomacy – based on the development of inter-parliamentary relations, where the aims are simply to exchange information and get to know the partners better, and not necessarily centred on the transfer of EU norms and values – is a significant determining factor (Petrova & Raube, 2016: 37). Compared to traditional executive diplomacy, parliamentary diplomacy has a greater variety of diplomatic tools (Luciano 2017), complements traditional diplomacy, encompasses a broader political role (Nitoiu & Sus 2016) and can be useful where traditional diplomacy does not work.

European parliamentary diplomacy is based on the creation of multilateral assemblies, also on the development of bilateral inter-parliamentary committees and the development of inter-party relations. Political meetings on an ideological basis (EPP; Socialists, etc.) take place before the plenary sessions of the inter-parliamentary assembly or at other times, and this model is linked to European culture and is another European practice that aims to be transferable to regions outside the EU (Luciano 2017). This has been identified as a process of political family building, whereby EP political groups build links on an ideological basis with political parties outside the EU (Petrova & Raube 2016).

Another important function of the EP's parliamentary diplomacy is its mediation missions to third countries to help resolve crisis situations and political conflicts. The European Parliament has already undertaken such diplomatic mediation missions on several occasions. Daan Fonck has argued that the role of the European Parliament was instrumental in the resolution of the Macedonian political crisis in 2015–2017, when, through mediation missions and socialising parliamentary diplomacy, the EP facilitated the Pržino Agreement between the Macedonian government and opposition parties (Fonck 2018). A similar political crisis between ruling and opposition forces took place in Ukraine under Viktor Yanukovich. In order to help resolve this crisis, a two-leader Cox-Kwasniewski mission was sent to Ukraine (2012–2013), which was seen as an instrument of the EP's diplomacy and was aimed not only at helping to resolve the crisis, but also at promoting the EU's objectives (Nitoiu & Sus 2016). Although these prominent political leaders were not MEPs, the EP carried out a lot of technical work, assisted the mission with political advisors from the EP Secretariat and prepared the mission agenda (Nitoiu & Sus 2016).

The academic literature review revealed that the role and involvement of the European Parliament in the development of EU foreign policy goes beyond its formal legislative powers, but seeks to contribute to the EU's normative and soft power objectives through parliamentary diplomacy, directly engaging with foreign partners in a variety of formats, through its socialisation, institutionalisation, political mediation and other diplomatic objectives. It is also noted that the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and other forms of parliamentary diplomacy can serve as an important tool for parliamentary scrutiny and monitoring, as the parliamentary dimension is complementary to international inter-governmental partnerships and often has a similar political agenda (Luciano 2017).

### **The interparliamentary interactions: Theory of functionalism and research methods**

The study applies functionalism theory to explain the range of instruments of European Parliamentary Diplomacy, its functions, the international interactions it generates and the factors that determine them.

#### *Social theory of functionalism*

Functionalism, as a social theory, focuses on the role of a particular institution, the system of social interactions it creates and its relationship with certain cultural elements, and it searches for its place, its purpose and its functions in the international social system. Developers of functionalist social theory, such as Talcott Parsons and other scholars who have interpreted his work (Ormerod 2020), explain that functionalist theory focuses on the social interactions between actors and the cultural values that govern them, specifically focusing on how social

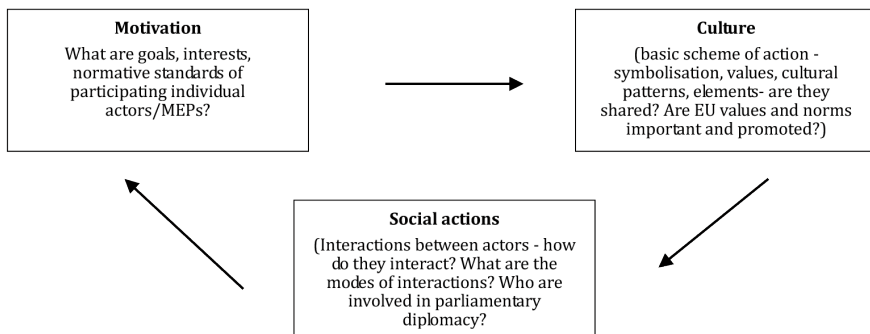


interactions lead to the formation of certain values and other cultural elements, and identifies the importance of the level of subjectivity (Selznick 1961) – an individual actor’s motivations.

The sociological theory of functionalism explains the system of social interactions by distinguishing the importance of cultural elements in the social system and the factors determining the motivation of actors. ‘Social action is depicted as the interaction between two (or more) organic actors in the context of the physical environment and the relevant culture’ (Ormerod 2019: 1875). In the international framework, social interactions include various forms of interactions between different international actors. The analysis of the EuroNest case study will seek to distinguish the forms of interactions, the formats of cooperation and the actors involved.

Cultural elements are important because without them social interactions would be meaningless (Ormerod 2019). Culture includes various symbolic, traditional cultural elements. The symbols, standards that are chosen to guide activities and interactions are called values (Ormerod 2019). The literature review showed that in most cases European parliamentary diplomacy is carried out for socialisation purposes, with the aim of transmitting European norms and cultural institutional elements. In this case, the research on EuroNest will seek to find out to what extent this is relevant for the development of parliamentary diplomacy with Eastern Partnership countries. Are European norms and values promoted and which ones?

Figure 1: Building inter-parliamentary institution: Analytical framework



Source: Author

Motivation is also highlighted as a crucial factor in Parsons’ social theory in explaining the action system (Ormerod 2019). Motivation, the actor’s ego, refers to the goals, interests and normative standards of individual actors, explaining what determines actors’ motivation for certain actions and activities within

a particular social system (Ormerod 2019). In this case, the aim will be to find out to what extent the individual motivations of individual MEPs matter in the development of forms of parliamentary diplomacy, and how they manifest themselves. How do MEPs themselves interpret the meaning and significance of inter-parliamentary diplomacy?

Thus, when analysing social interactions as a structure, it is important to look at how these three elements work in an integrated way (see Figure 1): the individual actors, the system of interactions between the actors and the cultural models – the value system (Ormerod 2019).

### *Operationalisation, data and methods*

This study is mainly based on a qualitative research strategy in relation to the social theory of functionalism. Several qualitative research methods were used to analyse the selected EuroNest case study: document analysis, content analysis and semi-structured interviewing. Considering the perspective of functionalism of social theory and in order to operationalise the theoretical assumptions in an empirical case study (see Table 3), the research asks the following questions:

1. What kind of social interactions are developed in the EP's relations with the Eastern Partnership countries? What are their functions?
2. Are cultural elements important? Does the EP seek to transmit or create certain cultural norms and values through such diplomatic social interactions?
3. How important are the individual motivations of MEPs, what are the factors that determine them and how do MEPs themselves explain the benefits and functions of these forms of diplomacy?

First, the forms, scope and means of parliamentary diplomacy developed by the European Parliament were analysed by examining EP and EuroNest documents (rules of procedure), and by collecting data from the official websites of the European Parliament, specific political groups of the EP and the EuroNest website. At this stage, it was important to find out how the social interactions take place, how regular they are and which actors are involved. The study covered the period since the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership (2009) and therefore involved the process of preparing for the establishment of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly and related issues. Next, the subsequent EuroNest case study covered all adopted EuroNest resolutions (54 in total) from the first plenary session convened in 2011 until 2024. A content analysis was carried out in order to find out what specific issues are most frequently highlighted in these resolutions, to what extent they emphasise the norms and values highlighted in the EU's global strategy, such as multilateralism, regional cooperation and the contexts in which they are promoted, as well as the normative goals of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which are considered to be the norms of the European

Table 3: Operationalisation, data and methods

Level of analysis	Focus	Data	Methods
1. Social interactions	Forms, intensity, frequency and scope of social interactions, actors involved, models of how cooperations take place	EuroNest Assembly founding documents, rules of procedure (2), EP, EuroNest and EP political groups' websites,  Collected data of semi-structured interviews (sample:23)	Documents' analysis  Semi-structured interviewing
2. Cultural patterns	Values, norms, symbols – identification of specific norms, values that guide EuroNest cooperation, number of mentions of norms and values	EuroNest Resolutions (Samples: 54),  Collected data of semi-structured interviews (sample: 23)  Freedom House data (scores of EaP countries)	Content analysis (manual reading and Word Cloud)  Semi-structured interviewing  Secondary analysis of statistical data
3. Individual motivations	Motivation, attitudes of MEPs, linkage to national interests and identification of other factors of motivations, calculations linked to national delegations	EP and EuroNest websites data  Collected data of semi-structured interviews (sample: 23)	Content analysis (manual reading, authors own calculations)  Semi-structured interviewing

Source: Author

foreign policy, and the cultural elements of European integration (Smith 2011). The content analysis by identifying and calculating mentions of specific norms, values and cultural patterns in the resolutions were based on a manual reading of the documents and Word Cloud tool.

Semi-structured interviewing with MEPs, their advisers and diplomats working in the EP Secretariat, was one of the most important methods as the data from the interviews was used in all stages of the analysis. The interviews were carried out at different points in time in 2011, 2014, 2019 and 2020. This was linked to

specific political events – the launch of the EuroNest Assembly in 2011, the signing of the association agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in 2014, and the EP elections in 2019. In the selection of the respondents, contact and interviews were sought from MEPs actively involved in EuroNest activities (leadership, committees), who represent different political groups, and their advisors were contacted if they refused. Interviews were also sought and conducted with diplomats, permanent staff of the EP who work with EuroNest and other inter-parliamentary committees in the development of the EP's relations with Eastern Partnership countries. The interviews were based on a semi-structured approach, with specific questions, but also raising other issues related to the respondents' answers. A total of 23 interviews were collected with representatives working in the relevant field of the EP's diplomacy. The MEPs belonged to/represent various political groups (mainly EPP, Social Democrats, Liberals and Greens). The aim of these interviews was to find out how the creators of this parliamentary diplomacy see their contribution and role in developing these forms of inter-parliamentary diplomacy. All interviewees are coded, in order to preserve the discretion promised to them, with only the date of the interview and the institution they represent. The duration of the individual interviews ranged from 20 to 70 minutes. Most of the interviews were conducted at the European Parliament in Brussels (18), the rest online or by phone. The breakdown of respondents was MEPs (11), MEPs' advisers (3), other secretariat and committee advisers (9). The following empirical analysis is based on three phases: 1. social interactions, 2. cultural patterns, 3. individual motivations, in looking for the answers to the above raised research questions.

### **Institutionalisation of social interactions with EaP countries: Developing 'EuroNest' Assembly**

The EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly was established as the parliamentary pillar of the EU's Eastern Partnership, alongside the other two pillars of intergovernmental cooperation and civil society (see Table 4). As it is depicted in Table 4, the Eastern Partnership seeks to build an institutional architecture for international partnership between the EU and EaP countries that reflects the EU's institutional experience, with summits at the intergovernmental level, meetings of ministers from different fields, meetings of diplomats, bureaucrats and experts, including at the regional and municipal levels. The EU has also created a civil society pillar, thanks to both financial and political incentives, bringing together several hundred (over 250) EaP NGOs, which are thus not only creating regional networks for mutual cooperation, but are also encouraged to contribute to the implementation and monitoring of the political agenda and the reforms in the EaP countries (EaP Civil Society Forum 2024; Interview 12 2014). In this way, the social transnational interactions created by the different institutions of the European Union go beyond the traditional diplomatic forms and create

links with actors from different fields and with wider civil society by giving them a voice (Rakutiene 2014).

The European Parliament has taken the initiative to create an inter-parliamentary cooperation pillar, based on the formula of 60 MEPs + 60 MPs from EaP countries (10 MPs representing a country). However, the process for Belarus' membership was protracted and it took almost two years of discussions to convene the first session of EuroNest (Interviews 7, 8, 9 2014). In 2011, the first EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly was finally held without Belarusian representatives. Throughout the selected period of this study, the status quo remained and the issue of Belarus' membership of EuroNest was not resolved.

Table 4: Three pillars of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) of the European Union

Inter-governmental dimension	Inter-parliamentary dimension	Inter-civil societal dimension
Summit (heads of states of 27 EU MS and 6 EaP countries) Summit once in two years	EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly (60+50): annual plenary since 2011	Eastern Partnership civil society forum: annual general assembly of regional platform since 2012
Annual Foreign Affairs Ministers sittings and other areas Ministers meetings	Euronest committees (4) – each meets twice a year	Involves over 250 NGOs from the Eastern Partnership countries.
Bi-annual sittings of diplomats and bureaucrats of the EU and EaP countries in thematic platforms (4)	Working groups (3)	Working thematic groups (4) bottom-up regionalism, societal networking
Conference of Regional and local authorities for the Eastern Partnership		Steering committees and national platforms (6)

Source: Author

### *EP social interactions with the EaP countries*

Social theory of functionalism, which examines the meaning and function of the institution, focuses on how, in what ways and with what frequency social interactions take place, and which actors are involved. In examining the activities of EuroNest and the European Parliament's social interactions with representatives of the Eastern Partnership countries, at least a few forms can be identified, which are analysed below (Interviews 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 2014): a) multilateral interactions, b) interactions based on political ideology, c) interactions with representatives of civil society.

## Multilateral interactions

When the EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly was finally set up, it was found that the formula of 60 MEPs + 10x6 MPs from each Eastern Partnership country actually works on the basis of 60 + 50, as Belarusian MPs do not participate, which creates a majority of MEPs within the EuroNest (Petrova and Raube, 2016). The Parliamentary Assembly meets annually in a main plenary session, where it adopts non-legally binding resolutions, recommendations and opinions addressed to the Eastern Partnership intergovernmental level. The rules of the EuroNest Assembly specify (2018 amendment, Article 3) that the Assembly seeks to play an advisory, monitoring and oversight role in matters related to the Eastern Partnership activities. It is also noted that the Assembly's annual plenary meetings are to be held in conjunction with and prior to the date of the Eastern Partnership Intergovernmental Summit, in order to propose recommendations (Rules of Procedure, Article 7) to the executives.

The Assembly has a Bureau of presidents and two co-presidents, one representing the EP and the other representing the Eastern Partnership countries. Both have equal status in the Assembly and are selected separately by the EP and the EaP countries. The Bureau of the vice-presidents, which is responsible for various organisational aspects, is also mirrored by four representatives each from the EP and the EaP countries. The plenary meetings of the Assembly also take place alternately in Brussels (EP) or in one of the Eastern Partnership countries. This is a different model compared to the intergovernmental level of the Eastern Partnership, where all summits were held either in Brussels or in EU member states.

The Rules note that EuroNest members 'may also organise themselves within the framework of their own political families within the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly' (EuroNest, Rules of Procedure 2018: Article 2). This reflects an aspiration to develop parliamentary practices similar to those of the EP itself, where MEPs organise themselves into political groups based on ideology but this has not yet been achieved. The Rules of Procedure (Article 11) stipulate that in plenary sessions, EuroNest members sit in alphabetical order, but not by national delegation. Meetings are deemed to be held if at least one-third of the members of each component of the Assembly (MEPs and the Eastern Partnership) are present and decisions are taken by a simple majority of the members present (EuroNest, Rules of Procedure 2018: article 16).

The EuroNest Assembly has formed four committees, which reflects the main areas of cooperation (1. Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy; 2. Economic Integration, Legal Approximation and Convergence with EU Policies; 3. Energy Security; 4. Social Affairs, Employment, Education, Culture and Civil Society), and meet more than every six months (at least twice a year, and one of the committee meetings is held in conjunction with the Plenary session). EuroNest Rules of Procedure (2018 amendments, article 2) defines that committees

are composed of a maximum of 30 members each -15 (MEPs) +15 (MPs from EaP countries). Each committee has two chairs and four vice-chairs, again on a mirror basis (MEPs and EaP representatives). As a rule, each EuroNest member chooses one of the committees to join. The rules (Article 6) also stipulate that members of committees may be appointed rapporteurs, i.e. drafters and rapporteurs of the document/report (similar to the EP practice). In 2023, two pairs of co-rapporteurs (L. Mazylis, EEP and I. Krulko, Ukraine MP; M. Michels, MEP GUE/NGL and M. Karapetyan, Armenia MP) worked on reports which in the 2024 EuroNest plenary session were issued as resolutions.

This institutional engineering of EuroNest's multilateral interactions indicates that the European Parliament seeks to transfer its institutional practices wherever possible, taking them as a model. It is also noticeable that the institutional representation mirrored is based on the principle of 'co-ownership', which is a defined principle of the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004). The European Parliament also has more opportunities to get to know the legislative institutions of the EaP countries, as plenary sessions are not only held in Brussels, but also in the EaP countries (see Table 5). This also raises the awareness of the European Parliament in the countries of the region, as the plenary sessions organised receive more local media coverage. The majority of interviewed respondents (Interviews 2, 4 2011; Interviews 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 2014; Interviews 17, 18 2019) believe that it helps foreign parliamentarians and publics to get in touch with the EU. 'Thanks to the European Parliament, they get a good partner and mediator, but we should not be under the vain illusion that we will quickly step in and solve things that governments have to deal with' (Interview 2 2011).

### **Social interactions based on political ideology**

Another form of diplomacy carried out by the European Parliament is inter-party relations, building ties based on ideological lines. In this case, the political groups of the European Parliament, mainly the major ones – the European People's Party, the Liberal Alliance and the European Socialist Group – are forging links with third-country political parties of a similar ideology, across the borders of EuroNest. Some respondents define this as the creation of some kind of daughter parties – political family groups (Interview 1 2011, Interviews 5, 6, 10, 11 2014).

The political groups in our chamber are very flexible in their approach to dealing with partners in the East. The political parties are free to act, especially the three largest ones – the EPP, the Socialist Alliance and the Liberal Parties – they represent, so to speak, majority of the whole Parliament and in almost all countries, strategic neighbours, they have their own affiliated parties, which are associate members of the EP parties. They are formally part of those clusters. (Interview 1 2011)

However, looking at the websites of all the main political groups in the EP, only the EPP publicly identifies its so-called daughter parties, the partners in the Eastern Partnership countries (more than 14 EaP political parties in total) and it is difficult to identify the frequency of such interactions (EPP 2024). The other EP political groups do not openly distinguish their links with specific parties, but emphasise that they have representatives in EuroNest or other inter-parliamentary committees. On this basis, it can be argued that the EPP political grouping has developed the most such cross-party links.

The advisor of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs explained that such 'party family' contacts have been quite intense with representatives of Georgia and Moldova, but this also depends on the political situation in the country concerned as the Eastern Partnership countries are characterised by a democratic decline (Interview 6 2014). Thanks to such contacts, the European Parliament is engaged in a certain amount of networking, strengthening communication links with political parties in third countries, exchanging information and seeking to exert a certain political influence (Interview 4 2011, Interviews 17, 18 2019). It is stronger if the third country is seeking closer relations and association with the European Union (Interview 1 2011, Interviews 5, 6 2014). Such links are most often established with countries that aim to democratise and Europeanise their political systems (Interview 18 2019). On the other hand, respondents also highlighted a case where such ties have increased divisions within the European Parliament itself, with the political crisis in Ukraine under Yanukovich rule in 2011, during political drama over the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

We have noticed that there is also disagreement in the European Parliament on Ukraine. There was a very big debate here internally, and the Ukrainians wanted to take advantage of this to 'divide and rule' us even more, and even managed to postpone one negative declaration against Ukraine. It was the only country that was able to do that. At the third attempt it was finally accepted, but the important thing was that our own Socialists [Socialist Group in the European Parliament] and the EPP [Christian Democrat Group in the European Parliament] realised that they were being manipulated by Ukraine, and that we were not helping Ukraine at all in this way. (Interview 1 2011)

Such examples illustrate the international partnerships that have been forged and the consequences of mutual socialisation, where not only the EP seeks to influence EaP politics, but representatives of political parties from EaP countries seek to shape the views of individual EP political groups.

### **Social interactions with civil society organisations**

One of the distinctive features of the European Parliament's diplomacy is its strong focus and the desire to establish and maintain regular contacts with civil society



organisations in foreign countries (Interview 3 2011). The respondents explained that it has become something of a traditional feature of European parliamentary diplomacy and is carried out in several ways (Interview 12 2014; Interview 23 2020):

- Meetings are held in partner countries when MEPs visit the country;
- Representatives of civil society from foreign countries are invited to attend European Parliament meetings and events;
- Representatives of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum speak at the plenary sessions of the EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly.

These social interactions establish regular contacts and communication with representatives of civil society as the European Parliament seeks to hear voices other than the formal position of governments and legislators (Interview 18 2019), and also seeks to promote dialogue between the governmental and non-governmental sectors, which is often very limited in weak democracies or transition countries (Interview 2 2011), and is non-existent in authoritarian states. The EuroNest resolutions also highlight the need to build and continuously strengthen dialogue with civil society organisations. As stated in the resolution, the Eastern Partners should involve civil society in 'regional dialogue and cooperation, in order to offer a fresh perspective on a variety of topics, including the promotion of democracy, economic reforms, trade, sectoral cooperation, gender equality . . . and the fight against corruption' (EuroNest 2012a: 2). It has become practice for a representative of the Civil Society Pillar of the Eastern Partnership to address each EuroNest Plenary Session and to express societal perspective (EuroNest 2021). In the case of Belarus, although its MPs do not participate in EuroNest formats, its civil society representatives and opposition leaders are given a voice during EuroNest sessions. For example, Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya gave speeches at the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> EuroNest sessions (EuroNest 2021; EuroNest 2024). This practice of European parliamentary diplomacy promotes dialogue between the government and civil society, gives a voice to different actors and helps the EP to gather information on the situation in different countries from different sources (Interview 3 2011). As an MEP involved in EuroNest noted:

Here is a great platform. I cannot imagine that the European Commission or the European Council could perform the function that the European Parliament does here. For example, even yesterday, representatives of NGOs from Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine gathered here in Brussels and had the opportunity to express their position on the TRIO initiative, on the developments in the Eastern Partnership because they feel stagnation, and they had the opportunity to speak on many other important issues. We need to work purposefully with these countries and with the European Commissioners responsible for this area. This is the function of Parliament – to spread ideas. (Interview 18 2019)

The practice of parliamentary diplomacy within EuroNest thus provides a platform for regular contacts and exchange of information, networking and socialising not only with the legislatures of the Eastern Partnership countries, but also with civil society representatives, NGOs.

### *Cultural patterns: Focus on norms and values*

Creating a culture of cooperation has been a challenging pursuit in the development of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly since its first steps. According to the respondents, the first EuroNest session held in 2011 was not successful and no resolution was adopted (Interview 3 2011).

‘It ended not only with no results (no resolution was adopted) but also with real physical battles between Armenians and Azerbaijanis’ (Interview 3 2011).

‘We realized that it would take a very long time to work with the political culture of our colleagues so that they would understand that the common interest is more important . . . than to fight with each other. The report contained a lot of good agreements on visas, on energy, but this was blocked by one problem due to the frozen conflict’ (Nagorno Karabakh) (Interview 1 2011).

Thus, after this experience of the first plenary session of EuroNest, the EP had to rethink and re-evaluate its cooperation strategy in order to be able to take joint decisions at later stages (Shyrokykh 2020). As shown in Table 5 – from 2011 to 2024, EuroNest convened 11 plenary sessions. In the subsequent plenary sessions, between 4 to 7 resolutions were adopted, which can be divided into at least three groups according to the themes and content of the resolutions (see Table 5): a) resolutions highlighting norms and values related to democratisation, human, political rights and the rule of law; b) economic convergence and approximation to EU law; and c) focus on common interests, mostly in energy issues, energy security and regional security. Energy policy is identified as a common regional interest between the EaP countries and the European Union.

### **Promotion of democracy and human rights**

Democracy and the application of democratic standards to EuroNest participating countries was set as a norm and a value shaped by the EP from the very beginning of the creation of EuroNest (Interviews 5, 6 2014; Interview 17 2019). It was the reason why Belarus was not invited to join EuroNest and it took such a long time to start it. The membership of Belarusian parliamentarians in the Assembly has been a widely debated and controversial issue in the EP and has not yet been resolved. Belarus is considered to be one of the participants in the EU’s Eastern Partnership and interviewees stated that the multilateral platform was designed to include Belarus. However, the interviews indicate that at the time of the creation of the Parliamentary Assembly there was no consensus in the European Parliament across different political groups as the positions were

Table 5: Outcomes of EuroNest Plenary sessions

Date	Place	Number of issued resolutions	The focus of resolutions Norms and values reflected in the resolutions
2011	Strasbourg (France)	0	-
2012	Baku (Azerbaijan)	5	Democracy; Media freedom; Human rights; political rights; Trade approximation; Energy security; Civil society involvement
2013	Brussels (Belgium)	4	Regional security; Approximation of national legislation with EU; Energy security; Poverty and social inclusion
2015	Yerevan (Armenia)	6	Partnership; Infrastructural cooperation; Energy security and efficiency; Cultural dialogue; Human rights, humanity; Regional security
2016	Brussels (Belgium)	5	Human rights; Regional security; Energy markets; Education cooperation
2017	Kyiv (Ukraine)	7	Media freedom; Energy cooperation; Women rights; Security; Human rights in conflict zones
2018	Brussels (Belgium)	7	Regional Security; Energy sustainability; Political rights; Energy cooperation and community
2019	Tbilisi (Georgia)	5	Democracy; digitalisation; Approximation in the energy sector; Education reforms; Trio plus cooperation
2020	Not convened/covid pandemics		
2021	Brussels (semi-remote mode) Belgium	4	Democracy; Cooperation and synergy (Education and economy); Energy efficiency
2022	Not convened		
2023	Chisinau Moldova	7	Democracy; economic development; Green energy; energy security; Approximation of vaccination programmes; EU integration; Peace
2024	Brussels (Belgium)	4	Peace; Children's rights; regional security; Partnership/EU integration

Source: Author, based on EuroNest official website information (2011–2024)

clearly divergent on Belarussian membership due to undemocratic elections in the country in 2010 and Alexander Lukashenko's rule. The EP Socialists were more open to Belarusian MP membership, but the majority of MEPs were more opposed to it (Interviews 5, 6 2014).

Various possible formulas were discussed. One idea was to invite part of the Belarusian parliament and part of the opposition, but in the end, it was decided not to invite them at all, but to leave them with ten seats to be reserved for the future in case of democratic parliamentary elections in Belarus. (Interview 6 2014)

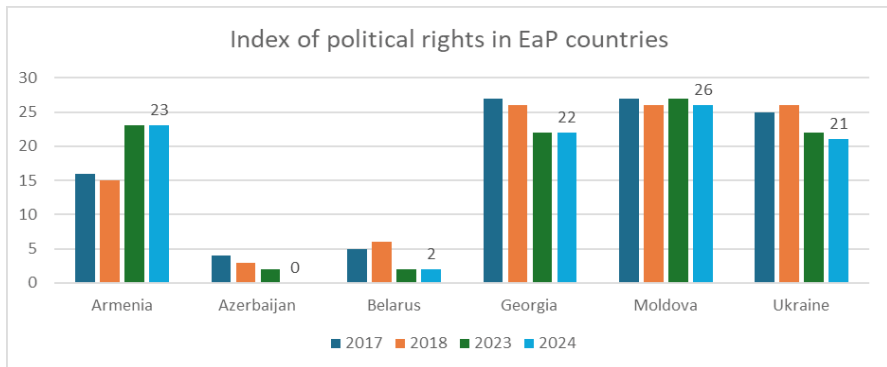
Referencing the social theory of functionalism, which suggests focusing on analysing how norms guide social interactions, this is an example of how the shaped norm, value – democracy – guided a decision and principle of social interactions when it was decided to include five partners from EaP parliaments instead of six. The agenda of promoting democratisation, human rights issues and the legal approximation to the EU are the themes discussed at each plenary session and often expressed as key cultural values and norms (see Table 5; Metsola 2023). The EuroNest resolution adopted in 2023 states that democratic governance should be improved in all Eastern Partnership countries:

Whereas the governance situation is different in every Eastern Partnership (EaP) country, but significant improvements could be achieved in all of them, in particular by implementing reforms in public administration and the justice sector, by introducing more efficient policies to fight corruption and by enhancing transparency and democratic accountability. (EuroNest Resolution 2023: 4)

Therefore, the resolution explicitly links the democratisation agenda to the implementation of reforms. The respondents underlined that the EU's Eastern Partnership is based on Europeanisation and that EuroNest also contributes to this process (Interviews 12, 13 2014; Interviews 17, 18 2019). As one MEP explained: 'This European School that we are teaching them, as part of a wider Europeanisation process, is very useful. Europe sees that it can benefit more from working with these countries because markets are opened, cultural exchanges are promoted and there is an exchange of people' (Interview 17 2019). This reflects the EU's ambition to build cooperation linked to European cultural values and norms, based on the socialisation and approximation processes. However, more than a decade of cooperation shows that the EaP countries have not made much progress in this area and are still struggling in democratisation (see Figure 2).

The Parliamentary Assembly also focuses on human rights (Resolution on the N. Savchenko case, EuroNest 2016), political freedoms, opposition and civil society issues (see Table 5). The European Parliament has paid particular attention

Figure 2: Index of political rights in Eastern Partnership countries



Source: Author retrieved from Freedom House (index of political rights – 0 to 40 (the most free). Previous data is not comparable as different methodology was used.

to Ukraine in this area during the negotiations on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the DCFTA under Mr Yanukovich's rule, and during the trial of opposition leader Mrs J. Tymoshenko (EuroNest 2012d, Resolution on the situation of Y. Tymoshenko). The EuroNest Assembly highlighted these issues by drawing attention to the political persecution of the opposition (EuroNest 2012d, Interview 13 2014).

### Socialisation and promotion of regional cooperation

Most of the MEPs and experts interviewed highlighted the socialising function of the Parliamentary Assembly (Interviews 5, 6 2014): while some put more emphasis on the promotion of European norms and values, based on Europeanisation (Interviews 18 2019), others stressed the need for training in regional cooperation and the transfer of diplomatic and political culture experience in this area (Interview 1, 2, 3 2011). Thus, regional cooperation has become a kind of norm to be shaped, an aspiration and one of the most important functions of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly.

'They need to be trained in regional cooperation . . . and this is where regional cooperation takes time' (Interview 17 2019).

The MEPs and experts interviewed stressed that the Assembly helps promote cooperation between countries in order to transfer the political culture of multilateral cooperation to the region (Interview 13 2014). Respondents highlighted this as an important function of an inter-parliamentary institution in terms of building a sense of community and consolidating the principles of regionalism and regional cooperation (Interviews 17, 18, 19, 2019). This is what the EU Global Strategy identifies as one of the principles of EU foreign policy. However, it is worth noting that these objectives of building regionalism and regional

cooperation, which are also considered important elements of the EU's model of governance and culture, were more pronounced in the first years of the Assembly's existence, and were highlighted in several of the resolutions that were adopted – stressing that creation of regional markets (EuroNest 2013), regional integration and trade would contribute to more effective economic governance, poverty reduction and human capital development (EuroNest 2012b; EuroNest 2013). However, more than a decade after the establishment of this interparliamentary institution, it can be stated that the objective of regionalism and regional cooperation involving all the countries of the region is very difficult to achieve, due to the differing interests of the countries involved in the partnership. It is also important to note that the agreements opening up EU markets and programmes have been signed bilaterally between the EU and the EaP country in question (association agreements, DCFTAs, visa agreements, etc.). Legal institutionalisation thus took place in a bilateral format.

Recently, two distinct groups have emerged: a) Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the remaining countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan (with Belarus still on the sidelines), due to the different aspirations of these countries in terms of their geopolitical orientation and their Europeanisation goals. The countries in the first group seek to become full EU members and Europeanise as soon as possible, while the second group seeks cooperation only where common interests can be found. For most of the EaP countries, therefore, the multilateral cooperation forum has little relevance. Ukraine and Moldova have moved from partners to candidates (from partnership to enlargement) with EU candidate status in 2022 and Georgia in 2023, and although negotiations have not yet started, national reforms and how they will be perceived by the EU are more important for full membership for each of them and regional cooperation is relevant insofar as it can help achieve the objectives of Euro-integration and is therefore more likely to be within the first group. The name TRIO ('Eastern Partnership Plus model', promoted by the EP) was coined in the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly to distinguish this group. It can thus be observed that, recently, even MEPs themselves have tended to group countries together, with less emphasis on the general perspective of regional cooperation between all countries, but more on those countries with greater ambitions for EU integration (Interview 18 2019). This strategy is in line with the strategy of conditionality and differentiation used in previous enlargement policy processes, where the aim was to make the lagging countries make more efforts and catch up with the advanced countries on the path of association and integration. However, there are differing views among EuroNest parliamentarians as to whether it is worth grouping these countries in this way.

The second group of countries felt that EuroNest's approach to them was unfair, that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia were singled out as better,

more advanced countries, that these countries had a better chance of closer cooperation with the EU, and that countries like Armenia were considered useless. . . . This is insulting to them. (Interview 15 2019)

These attitudes of respondents indicate that the ongoing social interactions are aimed at understanding the different cultural elements and interests of the partners, and at proposing more varied cooperation models in this context (Interviews 15, 19 2019). MEPs have made considerable efforts to build a culture of regional cooperation, but this has not helped prevent the regional conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh from escalating and military action in 2023. It can thus be argued that while the Assembly serves as a platform for regional cooperation and is often the only format that involves the EaP countries, it has not yet succeeded in fulfilling this function and in creating a culture based on regional cooperation.

### *Mediation and MEPs individual motivations*

The social theory of functionalism identifies the importance of individual motivation in the development of the institution as a causal factor. In the further analysis of the EP's interactions with the Eastern Partnership countries, it will be demonstrated that motivation has been an important factor that is observed both in the MEPs' choice of a particular inter-parliamentary assembly and in the EP's mediation missions. Mediation missions are a form of European Parliamentary diplomacy aimed at influencing the political situation in a partner country. During the period under review following the establishment of the Eastern Partnership and EuroNest, the European Parliament carried out at least two mediation missions in the Eastern Partnership countries.

The less researched mediation mission took place in Moldova in 2010, when a constitutional crisis broke out in the country as the parliamentary parties were unable to form a coalition and elect a president, who was elected by the Moldovan parliament at the time. This is one example of political influence, which, admittedly, can be described as a kind of ad hoc unplanned event, informal mission, which stabilised the political crisis in Moldova in 2010, when the European Parliament was led by Jerzy Buzek, a Pole. Buzek's advisor at the time described the situation as follows:

PM Filat calls and says: President Buzek, I don't know if you know what's going on in Chisinau. The Russians are here, the agreement with the Communists (Moldovan political party) is almost concluded, all is left to do is sign it, and all our European ambitions will collapse, and you – Europe – are not with us. (Interview 1 2011)

In this case, the leadership was taken by the president of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, who, as a Pole, with a good understanding of the political situation and the specificities of the region, went to play the role of mediator. His

political experience, which he shared with his partners in Moldova, explaining and teaching them about the difficulty, complexity and importance of building a European coalition and the principles of a coalition agreement, was also a major factor in this case, as respondents said (Interview 1 2011). Thanks to Mr Buzek's help and persuasion, he was able to bring together the leaders of the pro-European parties, Mr Lupu, Mr Filat and Mr Ghimpu, and, after a long period of persuasion and socialisation, and with the understanding of the mentality of the country's politicians, he was able to bring them together in a coalition, and eventually a coalition agreement was signed. Later, in his parliamentary activity report, Buzek also highlighted this role: 'In Moldova, I have firmly backed the creation of the pro-European coalition, which is now in power' (Buzek 2012: 21). This example illustrates the European Parliament's unconventional forms of diplomatic interaction and mediation missions, but the important factor was the individual personality and the willingness to play the role of mediator, based on individual motives.

Another, the Cox-Kwasniewski mission was carried out in Ukraine, which monitored the conflict between the ruling and opposition parties and the sentencing of opposition leader Tymoshenko. The mission also sought to persuade Ukrainian president Yanukovich to pursue the European agenda (Nitoiu & Sus 2016). This objective was not achieved at the time.

Functionalist theory identifies individual motives as a significant factor in social interactions. When analysing the composition of EuroNest, focusing on national trends, the influence of the individual motivation of MEPs is evident. This raises the following questions: which MEPs focus on the Eastern Partnership countries and what are their motives in developing EP parliamentary diplomacy?

The European Parliament is made up of 705 elected members (EP 9th term), and each MEP belongs not only to a specific political group according to ideology, or to a specific committee according to specialisation, but also to a specific EP inter-parliamentary assembly or a specific committee that deals with relations with third countries. What determines which particular interparliamentary institution an MEP joins and whether national interests and priorities are relevant in this place is a subject of academic research. Studies show that MEPs often do not dissociate themselves from their national party and national interests (Raunio & Wiberg 2002; Mühlböck 2012), as they are elected on the basis of national party lists. Some studies indicate that MEPs prefer assemblies that engage with regions that are more relevant to the foreign policy priorities of their national countries (Dri 2015). In this case, the European Parliament becomes another international institution that contributes to national interests and can be linked to the individual motivation of a given MEP (Interviews 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 2019). Clarissa Dri (2015), in the research on the composition and activities of the EP-Latin American inter-parliamentary assemblies, claims that the most interest in the Latin

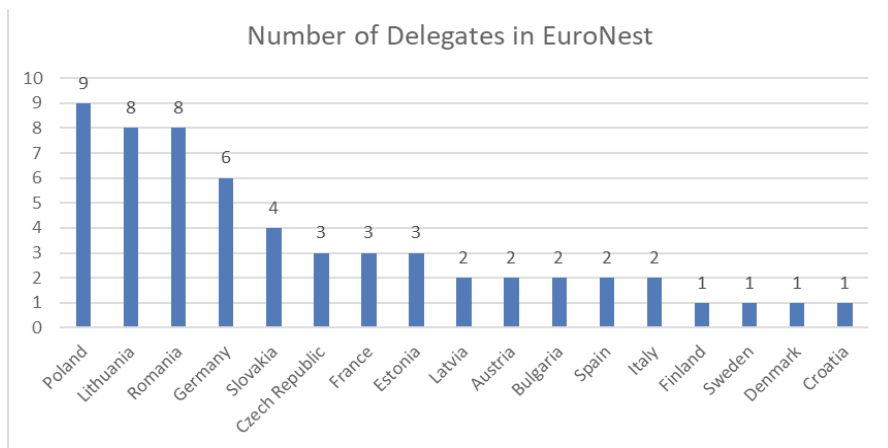


American regional assemblies is shown by MEPs from Spain and Portugal, who share historical, religious and linguistic proximity to these regions (Dri 2015).

The EuroNest delegation consists of 60 MEPs out of 705. Figure 3 shows that the largest national delegations to EuroNest are MEPs from Poland, Lithuania and Romania.

In the case of Lithuania, more than 72% (8 Lithuanian MEPs out of 11) of the entire Lithuanian delegation in the European Parliament of the 9<sup>th</sup> term are members of the EuroNest Interparliamentary Assembly. Other countries with a high

Figure 3: National composition of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly, 2019–2024, EP 9<sup>th</sup> term



Source: Author based on European Parliament (2024)  
Substitutes are not included.

proportion of national delegations to EuroNest are mainly countries with historical, linguistic, cultural and economic ties to the Eastern Partnership countries: Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Latvia and Estonia. The EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly was also chaired by Andrius Kubilius, Lithuanian MEP and former prime minister. As mentioned above, diplomatic missions were also carried out by Poles (Buzek; Kwasniewski). Germany has six representatives, but this represents only 6% of its total national delegation to the EP, and in the case of France, even less – only 4%. This shows a tendency for the region to attract more interest from MEPs of the EU members who are culturally and politically closer to it.

When asked about their reasons for joining this particular inter-parliamentary body, the MEPs interviewed highlighted the importance of the region for their country, and even a certain moral commitment to a greater European focus on the region (Interviews 15, 17, 18, 19 2019). For example, Lithuanian MEPs participating in EuroNest noted that they have experience and expertise in communicating

with the Eastern Partnership countries in these areas, and that this is relevant to Lithuania's national interests and priorities:

We know them better than the Germans, Italians or Portuguese. We understand them better and can explain to our colleagues what this or that means, or what is going on in those countries. . . . It is very important for us that the Eastern countries are more democratic, that human rights are more respected there. Then we will also have more security and, let's say, it will also be easier for us to live next to them. (Interview 15 2019)

Other MEPs have even stressed that it was the membership of Central Europe and the Baltic States in the European Union that brought the region onto the EU's foreign policy agenda, and that it is now their goal as MEPs to continuously emphasise and push for the EU to devote sufficient attention and resources to this region (Interview 17 2019). In this case, they are also emphasising that they seek to influence the content of the EU's foreign policy agenda (Interview 15, 17, 18 2019).

This Euronest is a very important and new institution, because there has never been such a tradition of political cooperation with these countries. From the perspective of the European Union, they were seen almost as vassals. Poor, going somewhere, but themselves don't understand where. . . . We have to keep reminding Europe about them, about the fate of those peoples, and our responsibility for that is very important. (Interview 17 2019)

Thus, these interviews and other data show that MEPs' activities and choices to establish international relations with a particular region and to engage in this kind of parliamentary diplomacy are also determined by their individual motivations, based on the national interests of the countries they represent, as well as their individual perceptions, certain normative standards, and their understanding of the EU's political agenda in relation to the region in question.

## Conclusions

The aim of this article was to explore the role of the European Parliament in EU foreign policy and to identify the functions of the EuroNest inter-parliamentary institution that the EP is developing together with the Eastern Partnership countries. The study was conducted by adapting the social theory of functionalism, which focuses on three aspects: social interactions, cultural patterns including norms and values that guide social interactions, and the importance of individual motivation.

Functionalist theory points out that when studying social interactions, it is possible to distinguish which actors are involved and in what forms cooperation

takes. The EuroNest empirical case study identifies several forms of interactions: regular multilateral interactions in EuroNest plenary sessions and committees; social interactions based on political ideology, whereby EP political groups develop cooperation with political parties of similar ideology in the Eastern Partnership countries (known as the creation of 'political families'); and social interactions, also including the establishment of regular contacts with civil society organisations. An indicative example is that representatives of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum attend and speak at EuroNest plenary sessions. Involving such diverse actors in social interactions helps the EP not only socialise and build relationships, but also exercise parliamentary scrutiny and receive information directly from foreign partners.

Functionalist social theory also stresses the importance of examining whether and how shared norms, values and cultural patterns are created within an institution and how they influence social interactions. The analysis of the EuroNest resolutions and the interviews' data provide examples of how the EP is trying to transfer many of the characteristics of the European cooperation and cultural model to EuroNest. This was already reflected in the early days of this institution when, due to the undemocratic elections, Belarusian parliamentarians were prevented from participating in EuroNest. The analysis of the resolutions indicates that democracy, norms of good governance, human rights, alignment of law with the EU (the so called 'approximation process') and the creation of a culture of regional cooperation were shaped as norms and values. However, this has not yet been put into practice, as the very different and conflicting interests of the Eastern Partnership countries have also been revealed (while some – Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia – have been pursuing an active Euro-integration agenda, others (Azerbaijan) have been pursuing only cooperation in trade and energy. Thus, while EuroNest serves as a platform for promoting a cultural model of regional cooperation and multilateralism, it has not yet fulfilled this function (for example, it has not succeeded in creating a culture of cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or in preventing a military conflict between these countries).

Finally, functionalist social theory also recognises individual motivations as an important factor in the development of institutions and social interactions. The empirical data of the EuroNest case study shows that the activities of individual MEPs are also driven by their individual motivations and perceived normative understanding of what the EU's policy towards the post-Soviet countries should be. More active in EuroNest are MEPs from the new EU member states, whose foreign policy and national interests are often determined by the situation in the Eastern Partnership region. Specific mediation missions by MEPs in the Eastern Partnership countries have also demonstrated this linkage and indicated a limited but certain influence of the EP's parliamentary diplomacy (e.g. EP President J. Buzek's mediation mission in Moldova in 2010).

The selected case study thus shows that MEPs are engaged in various forms of diplomacy, going beyond the legal competences granted to them by the Treaties and seeking to contribute to the development of EU foreign policy. The EuroNest Inter-Parliamentary Assembly acts as a complementary platform, a parliamentary pillar, to complement intergovernmental cooperation in the framework of the Eastern Partnership and to build stronger relations between the European Union and the post-Soviet countries participating in the Eastern Partnership. The platform aims to build trust and a sense of commonality between the EaP countries themselves and with the EU through a range of social interactions. It is a platform for the dissemination of European cultural values and legal norms and an instrument for Europeanisation.



### **Funding**

No funding information.

### **Disclosure statement**

No conflict of interest was reported.

SIMA RAKUTIENĖ is associate professor of political science and international relations at the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy, and senior researcher at V.Kavolis transdisciplinary research Institute of Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania. She teaches courses on 'EU institutions', 'EU foreign politics', 'International cooperation in the Black Sea region', 'EU neighbourhood and development Politics'. She is the author of *'Normative, institutional and economic sources of EU foreign policy'* (VMU 2019) and co-author of monograph *'European and/or national interests? Dilemmas of loyalty and the representation of Lithuanian citizens in the European Parliament'* (VMU 2021). Her articles have been published in such academic journals as *Studies of transition states and societies*, *New Eastern Europe*, *Politologija*, *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, *Croatian international relations review*, among others.

### **References**

- Bressanelli, E., Chelotti N. & Lehmann, W. (2019): Negotiating Brexit: the European Parliament between participation and influence. *Journal of European Integration*, 41(3), 347–363.
- Buzek, J. (2012). End of Term report. *Arhiv.ds-rs.si*, <accessed online: <http://www.arhiv.ds-rs.si/sites/default/files/file/dokumenti/novice/jerzy-buzek-end-of-term-report-final.pdf>>.

- Cardwell, P. J. & Jančić, D. (2019). The European Parliament and development cooperation: democratic participation in the 'low politics' of EU external relations. *Journal of European Integration*, 41(3), 365–381.
- Dri, F. C. (2015): The European Parliament and regional cooperation. The case of Latin America. In S. Stavridis & D. Irrera (eds.): *The European Parliament and its international relations*. New York: Routledge, 161–177.
- Dri, F. C. (2010): Limits of the Institutional Mimesis of the European Union: The Case of the Mercosur Parliament. *Latin America Policy*, 1(1): 52–74.
- EaP Civil society Forum (2012): *Short speech to Euronest parliamentary Assembly*. Baku, 3 April, <accessed online: [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/f4d6cd79-8af6-4c5d-af2a-1aa7afaeedb/Plenary\\_2\\_speech-CSF.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/f4d6cd79-8af6-4c5d-af2a-1aa7afaeedb/Plenary_2_speech-CSF.pdf)>.
- EaP Civil society Forum (2024): General Assembly. *Eap-csf.eu*, <accessed online: <https://eap-csf.eu/general-assembly/>>.
- EuroNest (2021): Composition of the Euronest parliamentary Assembly. Brussels, *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, <accessed online: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/euronest/en/home/members.html>>.
- EuroNest (2011): Constitutive session of the Euronest PA. Brussels. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 3 May, <accessed online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/euronest/en/plenary/constitutive-session.html>>.
- EuroNest (2012a): Resolution on strengthening civil society in the Eastern Partnership countries, including the question of cooperation between government and civil society, and the question of the reforms aimed at empowering civil society. Baku. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 3 April.<accessed online: [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/3be7fffd-f17c-44f9-8bfo-ba19a537fe9b/Plenary\\_2\\_res-civil-society\\_EN.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/3be7fffd-f17c-44f9-8bfo-ba19a537fe9b/Plenary_2_res-civil-society_EN.pdf)>.
- EuroNest (2012b): Resolution on trade agreements between the EU and the Eastern European Partners, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, and the EU assistance in this field. Baku. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 3 April, <accessed online: [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/b774f25b-096a-4c5b-a9a9-aod6165e1561/Plenary\\_2\\_res-trade\\_EN.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/b774f25b-096a-4c5b-a9a9-aod6165e1561/Plenary_2_res-trade_EN.pdf)>.
- EuroNest (2012c): Resolution on energy security, renewable energy, energy efficiency, energy infrastructure: developments in the Eastern Partnership and in the EU countries. Baku. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 3 April. <accessed online: [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/c951ca03-f43d-42f3-94e8-33dcbe25d5b0/Plenary\\_2\\_res-energy\\_EN.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/c951ca03-f43d-42f3-94e8-33dcbe25d5b0/Plenary_2_res-energy_EN.pdf)>.
- EuroNest (2012d): Resolution on the situation of Y. Tymoshenko. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 3 April, <accessed online: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/218717/Plenary\\_2\\_res-Tymoshenko\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/218717/Plenary_2_res-Tymoshenko_EN.pdf)>.
- EuroNest (2013): Resolution on combating poverty and social exclusion in the Eastern Partner countries. Brussels. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 28 May, <accessed online: [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/4e90994c-2179-4ce3-88c2-fe8dc515b954/plenary\\_3\\_resolution\\_soc\\_28052013\\_en.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/4e90994c-2179-4ce3-88c2-fe8dc515b954/plenary_3_resolution_soc_28052013_en.pdf)>.

- EuroNest (2015): Resolution on engaging in a stronger partnership between the EU and Eastern European partner countries through the European Neighbourhood Instrument for 2014-2020. Yerevan. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 17 March, <accessed online: [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/co28a3ae-05d8-4e6a-a5f6-adb3fo65d6o8/PLEN\\_4\\_res\\_POL\\_EN.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/co28a3ae-05d8-4e6a-a5f6-adb3fo65d6o8/PLEN_4_res_POL_EN.pdf)>.
- EuroNest (2016a): Resolution on EU multiannual financial perspectives and their impact on economic cooperation among Eastern Partnership countries. Brussels. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 22 March, <accessed online: [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/6c5d916c-2884-42ca-82f3-8c1rod5o6f8b9/PLEN\\_5\\_econ\\_resolution\\_en.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/6c5d916c-2884-42ca-82f3-8c1rod5o6f8b9/PLEN_5_econ_resolution_en.pdf)>.
- EuroNest (2016b): Resolution on N. Savchenko case. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 22 March, <accessed online: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cms-data/218586/PLEN\\_5\\_savchenko\\_resolution\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cms-data/218586/PLEN_5_savchenko_resolution_en.pdf)>.
- EuroNest (2018): Rules of procedure for the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, <accessed online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/euronest/en/about/rules-of-procedure>>.
- EuroNest (2021): Draft agenda, Ninth Ordinary Session. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 20 April, <accessed online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/271883/Agenda%20of%209th%20Ordinary%20Session%20of%20the%20Euronest%20PA.pdf>>.
- EuroNest (2023): Resolution on promoting governance in public institutions on the basis of political dialogue and institutional cooperation in order to increase efficiency and administrative capacity. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 21 February, <accessed online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cms-data/267144/Promoting%20governance%20in%20public%20institutions%20on%20the%20basis%20of%20political%20dialogue%20and%20institutional%20cooperation.pdf>>.
- EuroNest (2024): 11th Ordinary Session of the Euronest Brussels. *EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly*, 20 March, <accessed online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/euronest/en/plenary/11th-ordinary-session>>.
- European Parliament (2017): EuroNest: marking Eastern Partnership successes and challenges, Press release. *European Parliament*, 31 October, <accessed online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20171031IPR87218/euronest-marking-eastern-partnership-successes-and-challenges>>.
- European Parliament (2024): Delegations. *European Parliament*, <accessed online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/depa/members>>.
- EPP (2024): European Peoples Party, *EPP*, <accessed online: <https://www.epp.eu/parties-and-partners>>.
- Fonck, D. (2018): Parliamentary diplomacy and legislative-executive relations in EU foreign policy: studying the European Parliament's mediation of the Macedonian political crisis (2015-17). *Journal of Common Market studies*, 56(6), 1305-1322.

- Grau i Segu, M. (2019): Democratic representation and information in a supra-national setting: the case of European parliament (1979-2019). *Parliaments, estates & representation*, 39(3), 400–411.
- Kingah, S. & Cofelice A. (2015): The European Parliament and the engagement with African regional parliaments. In: Stavridis, S. & Irrera, D. (eds.): *The European Parliament and its international relations*. New York: Routledge, 145–160.
- Kilic, S. (2024): Half-Hearted or Pragmatic? Explaining EU Strategic Autonomy and the European Defence Fund through Institutional Dynamics. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 18(1), 43–72.
- Kostanyan, H. & Vandecasteele B. (2015): Socializing the Eastern neighbourhood: the European Parliament and the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly. In: Stavridis, S. & Irrera, D. (eds.): *The European Parliament and its international relations*. New York: Routledge, 220–234.
- Luciano, B. T. (2017) Inter-parliamentary European Union-Latin American Caribbean (EU-LAC) relations and the increasing political convergence among Latin American regional parliaments (2006-15), *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 37(3), 318–334.
- Meislova, M. B. (2021): In the spotlight, or behind the scenes? The European Parliament as an actor in Article 50 withdrawal negotiations. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29(4), 567–583.
- Mühlböck, M. (2012): National versus European: Party Control over Members of the European Parliament. *West European Politics*, 35(3), 607–631.
- Noutcheva, G. (2015): Societal empowerment and Europeanisation: revisiting the EU's impact on democratization. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(3), 691–708.
- Nitoiu C. & Sus M. (2017): The European Parliament's Diplomacy - a Tool for Projecting EU Power in Times of Crisis? The Case of the Cox-Kwasniewski Mission. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(1), 71–86.
- Pertiwi, L. A. (2024): The EU's Approach to Sanctions on Russia: A Critical Analysis of the Existing Literature. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 18(3), 61–86.
- Rakutiene, S. (2014): The EU's Eastern Partnership as international governance: what is the role of the civil society? *European Quarterly of political attitudes and mentalities*, 3(2), 50–64.
- Rakutienė, S. & Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė I. (2020): How do Lithuanian citizens perceive the European parliament? EU legitimacy issue and trust in the European parliament. *Croatian international relations review*, 26(87), 64–84.
- Raunio T. & Wiberg M. (2002): Controlling Outcomes: Voting Power in the European Parliament 1979-2000. *Journal of European Integration*, 24(2), 75–90.
- Ruland, J. & Carrapatoso A. (2015): Democratizing inter-regionalism? The EU Parliament and its Asia relations. In: Stavridis, S. & Irrera, D. (eds.): *The European Parliament and its international relations*. New York: Routledge, 197–219.



- Petrova, I. & Raube, K. (2016): Euronest: What Drives Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation in the Eastern Partnership? *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 21(1), 35–56.
- Selznick, P. (1961): The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons. *American Sociological Review*, 26(6), 932–935.
- Servent, A. R. (2014): ‘The role of the European Parliament in international negotiations after Lisbon. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(4), 568–586.
- Smith, M. E. (2011): A liberal grand strategy in a realist world? Power, purpose and the EU’s changing global role. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 18(2), 144–163.
- Stavridis, S. & Irrera, D. (eds.) (2015): *The European Parliament and its international relations*. New York: Routledge.
- Shyrokykh, K. (2020): How effective is the EU’s human rights persuasion in its post-Soviet neighbourhood? Insights from a statistical assessment. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 28(3), 283–303.
- Ormerod, R. (2020): The history and ideas of sociological functionalism: Talcott Parsons, modern sociological theory, and the relevance for OR. *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 71(12), 1873–1899.
- Treaty of Lisbon (2007): Treaty of Lisbon. Brussels. *Official Journal of the European Union*, <accessed online: [http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/688a7a98-3110-4ffe-a6b3-8972d8445325.0007.01/DOC\\_119](http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/688a7a98-3110-4ffe-a6b3-8972d8445325.0007.01/DOC_119)>.
- YouTube (2017): Euronest Assembly Gives Voice to Eastern Europe, *Youtube*, <accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRtOcfSbYCw>>.

### List of interviews

- Interview 1 (2011): Advisor, European Parliament, Bureau of EP president. Brussels, 12 October.
- Interview 2 (2011): Member of the European Parliament, ALDE political group. Brussels, 12 October.
- Interview 3 (2011): MEP advisor, European Parliament, ALDE political group. Brussels, 12 October.
- Interview 4 (2011): Member of the European Parliament, Socialists & Democrats political group. Tallinn, 06 April.
- Interview 5 (2014): Advisor, European Parliament, Bureau of EP president. Brussels, 15 January.
- Interview 6 (2014): Advisor, European Parliament, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Brussels, 15 January.
- Interview 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 (2014). Advisors, European Parliament, Unit for EuroNest, secretariat. Brussels, 21 January.
- Interview 12 (2014): EaP Civil society representative, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, secretariat. Brussels, 21 January.
- Interview 13 (2014): MEP advisor, European Parliament, Bureau of EP president. Brussels, 21 January.



- 
- Interview 14 (2019): Member of European Parliament, Socialists & Democrats political group. Brussels, 3 December.
- Interview 15 (2019): Member of European Parliament, Greens/European Free alliance. Brussels, 4 December.
- Interview 16 (2019): Member of European Parliament, Socialists & Democrats political group. Brussels, 4 December.
- Interview 17 (2019): Member of European Parliament, Liberals/Renew Europe political group. Brussels, 5 December.
- Interview 18 (2019): Member of European Parliament, EPP political group. Brussels, 5 December.
- Interview 19 (2019): Member of European Parliament, EPP political group. Brussels, 5 December.
- Interview 20 (2020): Member of European Parliament, Liberals/Renew Europe political group. Interview by phone, 25 June.
- Interview 21 (2020): Member of European Parliament, Socialists & Democrats political group. Interview by phone, 30 June.
- Interview 22 (2019): Member of European Parliament, EPP political group. Interview by phone, 2 July.
- Interview 23 (2020): MEP advisor, European Parliament, ALDE political group. Interview by phone, 8 July.