

Transformation or Defiance: The Impact of the European People's Party on Serbian and Croatia Parties*

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Abstract

This article examines comparatively the stances of Serbian and Croatian political parties on European integration in relation to their international affiliations. It specifically seeks to explore how and to what extent the European People's Party (EPP) exerted influence on parties from these two countries. The article analyses the nature of these linkages in a systematic manner by employing the concept of direct and indirect transnational impact. The study argues that, in general, the EPP was not a crucial driving force behind party stances on the European Union (EU) and its direct impact was rather low. However, the EPP appears to have had a considerable indirect impact on parties that were at an early stage of ideological transformation towards becoming credible mainstream and pro-European parties, after a long legacy of Eurosceptic and nationalist politics. These parties strove to obtain European legitimacy by becoming members of the EPP and were, consequently, more willing to harmonise their positions with (potential) European partner. Moreover, 'EU commitment' of Serbian and Croatian applicants, closely scrutinised by the EPP, was primarily related to their affirmative positions on EU membership, rather than their stances on any particular model of European integration.

Keywords: Serbian and Croatian parties; European People's Party; transnational party linkages; party attitudes towards the EU

DOI: 10.5817/PC2015-2-147

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, a number of parties in the countries of the former Yugoslav Federation have shifted their stance on European integration. This transformation – in most cases towards the more Euro-enthusiastic position – has taken place with a rapidity rarely seen in the contemporary European party system. Despite harbouring deeply antagonistic feelings

* This work was supported by the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES), the Sussex European Institute and the Sussex branch of the European Movement.

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towards Europeans and the EU, members of these parties have gradually become cognizant of the pragmatic political need to adapt to the disliked yet ever-present European Union and have adopted pro-EU policies. At the same time, other parties have remained consistently pro- or anti-European, despite conflicting relations with the EU and shifting domestic party politics.

It is recognized in the comparative literature that, though rare, parties may undergo fundamental changes of ideology and stance on European integration. Examples are the British Labour Party in the 1980s and Greece's PASOK in the 1990s. Yet very little is known about why some mainstream Serbian and Croatian parties have fundamentally shifted their positions on the EU, and this is a surprise given the surge of studies of the positions taken on the EU by Central and Eastern European parties since 2000 (Taggart, Szczerbiak 2001; 2002; Batory 2008). With a few notable exceptions (Haughton, Fisher 2008; Konitzer 2011; Vachudova 2012), the comparative literature has mostly ignored these 'difficult' cases on the European periphery. And despite growing interest by scholars in how parties determine their positions on the EU in general (Sitter 2001; Kopecký, Mudde 2002; Steenbergen et al. 2007; Szczerbiak, Taggart 2008), a number of controversies remain over the driving forces behind party responses to Europe. There has been a protracted debate about the factors that motivate parties to take stances on the issue, with some form of party ideology or strategy most often cited.

This article aims to bring into this scholarly debate the peculiar, under-researched case of Serbian and Croatian parties and to advance the discussion of the key determinants underlying party responses to Europe. It does so by qualitatively comparing how parties in these two countries have adopted and shifted positions on the EU in response to a factor rarely dealt with in the existing literature, that of transnational relations. Transnational linkages have been an important driver of party change in the unsettled party milieu of the Western Balkans, where some political actors have been susceptible to foreign influences.

The study thus seeks to examine how and to what extent the EPP has impacted Serbian and Croatian parties in terms of their positions on the 'substance of European integration' (Szczerbiak 2008: 225) and their countries' EU membership. Specifically, it assesses the extent to which these parties have developed or altered stances on the EU in response to the direct or indirect requirements of the EPP. Direct requirements are those contained within a set of formal written obligations imposed by the EPP on potential members; indirect requirements arise from the diffuse, long-term influence of policy education and assistance provided by the EPP, which may induce subtle, gradual changes into party policies and rhetoric.

The focus is on Serbian and Croatian parties that have had direct or indirect contacts with the EPP. This includes both full and associate members of the EPP¹ – the G17 Plus/United Regions of Serbia (*G17 Plus/Ujedinjeni Regioni Srbije*, G17 Plus/URS), the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica*, HDZ), the Croatian Peasants' Party (*Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka*, HSS) – as well as the Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska Stranka Srbije*, DSS), which withdrew its EPP membership. Parties that have intended to join the EPP are also examined, in particular the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS), New Serbia (*Nova Srbija*, NS), and the Croatian Party of Rights (*Hrvatska Stranka Prava*, HSP). The Croatian Party of Rights Ante Starčević (*Hrvatska Stranka Prava Ante Starčević*, HSP AS) is also analysed, since it ran on the HDZ (thus the EPP) slate for the European Parliament (EP).

The study draws on a series of interviews with Serbian and Croatian politicians and EPP officials. It also utilizes the qualitative content analysis of party programmatic documents, as well as public statements from both Serbian and Croatian and European politicians. The presentation is as follows: first is a review of the comparative literature on party responses to Europe that takes their transnational linkages into account. This is followed in the second section by a proposed conceptual framework with a brief overview of the relations between the EPP and Serbian/Croatian parties. The core section examines these parties' stances on the EU as it relates to their EPP affiliations. The concluding section summarizes key findings and draws possible implications from the Serbian and Croatian cases.

2. Party Attitudes towards the EU and Their Transnational Linkages in the Comparative Literature

This section discusses arguments derived from the comparative literature on parties' stances on the EU in relation to their transnational linkages. Two broad schools of research are involved. The first school seeks to examine the general impact of the EU on parties; the second, what has shaped party stances on the EU. The transnational relations of parties have come under scrutiny only rarely.

Scholars in the first camp found some evidence that European transnational parties have had an impact, but only to a limited extent. Ladrech (2002: 399) discovered 'relations beyond the national party system' were important, since they may lead to 'new organizational and programmatic activities and innovation'. Later, Ladrech (2008) argued that European transnational federations are in general marginal to the pursuit of national party goals and that their role may be more significant only in the lowering of transaction costs for party elites to gain insight into European-level decision-making. Similarly, Haughton (2009) found that participation in European transnational party federations simply as a way to gain a 'badge of approval' had induced no fundamental changes into the programmes of national parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Haughton (2009: 417) thus concluded that there was 'a low to medium impact of European transnational parties on parties in Central and Eastern Europe', given 'very little evidence of any borrowing, or evidence of policy borrowing only on explicitly European issues'. Enyedi and Lewis (2006) claimed that European party federations can exert a large influence on the political orientation of Central and Eastern European parties, which are increasingly orienting themselves towards one of the standard European families. However, Enyedi and Lewis (2006: 236) did not find evidence of deeper ideological change, although there was 'a considerable degree of genuine ideological borrowing going on'.

Furthermore, Holmes and Lightfoot (2011: 50) identified 'attempts [by the Party of European Socialists, PES] to impact the policy of parties in Central and Eastern Europe in relation to attitudes towards the EU'. They noted that this was not problematic for this party federation, because the majority of social democratic parties were relatively Euroenthusiastic. As a result, the PES was not compelled to intervene in the national party's attitudes towards the EU to any substantial extent. But Holmes and Lightfoot (2011: 52) also argued that social democratic parties largely perceived EU membership instrumentally, as a tool and 'a means to an end',

without sharing a deep common understanding of the EU. These authors thus concluded that the PES's role has been superficial, since it has not contributed to deep programmatic change nor to change of any other kind.

Szczerbiak and Bil (2009: 447) also argued that there is no obvious linear relationship between Polish party positions on European integration and the extent to which the EU impacts a party. Timuş (2014) similarly found that although the commitment to a federal model of Europe represented a major element in EPP political programmes, none of three Ukrainian applicant parties made specific reference to the model of a united Europe. Timuş argues that this has perhaps contributed to the lack of a clear EU membership perspective for Ukraine, reducing the importance of this requirement. Conversely, Dakowska (2002) noted that European transnational federations affect the identity of political elites from Central and Eastern Europe. She argued that this was an important channel for the socialization of political elites, one that critically shaped their perceptions and decisions. Dakowska (2002: 275) concluded that an essential function of transnational party cooperation has been 'to socialise important anti-European parties'.

On the other hand, scant literature exists on transnational party relations by investigators exploring the factors that shape party attitudes towards the EU. Batory (2008: 24), for example, argued that links with European transnational federations may be expected to impact Hungarian party policies, although this might be difficult to determine. In particular, she argued that national parties may support EU integration because of transnational influence, but they may also be susceptible to European influences precisely because of their pro-European positions. Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008: 14) pointed out that transnational party cooperation is a potentially important causal factor, one 'often overlooked or neglected in accounts that focus on domestic drivers of politics'. Pridham (2002: 29) made the strongest case for the importance of transnational party relations. He argued that there is 'a quasi-organic link' between parties' transnational affiliation and their general approach to European integration. Pridham (2008: 100) specified that conditions based upon European integration were routine and have existed since the early days of transnational party cooperation; with other conditions, they have had 'a powerful influence and served to produce formal but also real changes in party positions and behaviour, including by Eurosceptic parties'. Orlović (2008: 212) similarly argued that 'membership in European transnational party federations can represent a crucial mechanism of programme and value standardization of Serbian parties'. Fink Hafner (2008: 178), however, posited that 'the impact of Europarties on Serbian parties should not be overestimated, especially not in relation to domestic factors'. The lack of this impact, she claimed, is primarily a consequence of the weak, very recent start of the European socialisation of the Serbian party elite.

A review of the existing literature points to significant differences among scholars on the extent to which transnational party linkages have impacted national party stances and policies on the EU. But the majority of scholars have concluded that there is some, albeit meagre, influence. This article attempts to contribute to this debate by looking at the EPP's effect on Serbian and Croatian national parties. To do so, it utilizes the concept of direct and indirect impact. This concept is explored in detail in the section that follows.

3. Conceptual Framework

The general influence of the EU on political parties is a complex phenomenon that poses a challenge for researchers attempting to analyse it. There are significant difficulties in analytically separating out the impact of Europe from national-level explanatory factors, and any attempt to assess the impact of the EU raises the problem of causality (Houghton 2009). This analysis faces the same challenges, particularly given that European transnational party federations lack many easily identifiable instruments to influence national parties. The key questions that arise in the analysis are: how does one assess the relationship between a party's EU stance and the potential effect of European transnational party federations, how is this influence measured, and what indicators should be employed? To address these issues, the notion of the direct and indirect impact of transnational party federations is utilized (Table 1). This notion is well recognised in the comparative literature on both the Europeanisation of political parties and the factors that shape party positions on Europe (Mair 2000; Dakowska 2002; Enyedi and Lewis 2006; Timuş 2011).

Table 1: Indicators of the Influence of European Transnational Party Federations on National Party Attitudes towards the EU

Type of impact	
Direct impact	Indirect impact
Changes in party programmes and policies on the EU as a result of requirements stated in programmatic documents of European transnational party federations	Subtle, gradual changes in party policies and EU rhetoric because of the long-term influence of policy education and assistance from European transnational party federations and their political foundations (socialisation and persuasion)
Mode of analysis	
Analysis of programmatic documents of European transnational party federations (requirements related to the 'EU commitments' of member parties) Analysis of programmatic documents of national parties, EU rhetoric and parliamentary voting on EU issues	Analysis of the rhetoric and policy education of European transnational party federations aimed at influencing member parties' attitudes to the EU Analysis of changes in national party policies and EU rhetoric

Source: Adapted Mair (2000), Dakowska (2002), Fink Hafner (2008).

This study aims to assess the extent to which parties have reacted to EPP requirements by developing or changing stances on the EU. A number of possible influences attributable to this party federation are differentiated into two categories on the basis of direct versus indirect impact, as outlined in Table 1. A direct impact is conceptualized as one involving a set of formal written obligations placed by the EPP upon potential members. The study seeks to assess how strictly 'EU commitment conditionality' has been employed. In other words, the goal is to trace potential programme adaptations by Serbian and Croatian parties back to the requirements imposed by this party federation. An indirect impact is conceptualized as one involving long-term influence of a diffuse nature exerted through policy education on EU affairs, political training and assistance provided by European transnational party federations and their political foundations. This link, often perceived as socialisation,

is recognised by scholars (Dakowska 2002; Fink Hafner 2008; Pridham 2008) who argue that the socialisation effects of transnational parties may significantly impact party stances and policies.

The logic underpinning the model is that it is party leaders who decide a party's policies and general attitudes towards the EU (particularly in view of the fact that parties in the Western Balkans have predominantly been 'leadership parties'). They may be motivated by strategic calculations or (presumably rarely) ideological adherence to the founding principles of the European transnational party federation, and a direct impact may occur when they change programmatic documents to meet the requirements imposed under membership pre-conditions. Following the decision by party elites, party members follow suit with greater or lesser enthusiasm. That is when the role played by European transnational party federations in transforming party members' attitudes to the EU may be significant. An indirect influence is aimed at the party as a whole, not only at political leaders. It may result in subtle, gradual changes visible in party rhetoric and policies rather than programmatic documents. Therefore, indirect influence is assessed primarily by analysing the rhetoric and policies of both the EPP and Serbian/Croatian parties.

4. The EPP and Serbian/Croatian Parties

Compared to other Central and Eastern European parties, Serbian and Croatian parties' history of transnational relations with international and European transnational party federations is brief. There were no contacts until the 1995 Dayton peace agreement (Pridham 1999), which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Socialist International (SI) and its member parties in Western Europe were the first to show an interest, but there was little progress in working with parties in Serbia and Croatia until the early 2000s because of their authoritarian regimes. For example, the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička Partija Srbije*, SPS) of the former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević was a distinctly pariah party in transnational circles throughout the 1990s (Pridham 1999). The first contacts were established after the 2000 democratic changes in both countries; however, many relevant Serbian parties have not yet managed to secure transnational affiliations.²

The Serbian and Croatian parties' relations with the EPP are shown in Table 2. The most striking aspect here is that none of the relevant centre-right parties in Serbia were members of this leading European party federation. While the DSS withdrew its membership because of its opposing view on the status of Kosovo, the G17 Plus/URS effectively ceased to exist in 2014, and the SNS and NS have not yet proved their democratic and pro-EU orientation and have therefore not been granted membership. Conversely, both core centre-right and conservative parties in Croatia, the HDZ and the HSS, were fully integrated into this transnational party federation. Furthermore, while the nationalist and Eurosceptic HSP abandoned its efforts to join the EPP, another party from the same political tradition, the HSP AS, successfully competed on the HDZ (thus the EPP) slate for the EP, despite opposition from the EPP. This party later affiliated with the Eurosceptic Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR), but it lost its international affiliation when the party president and only member of the European Parliament (MEP), Ruža Tomašić, resigned in late 2014.

Table 2: Serbian and Croatian Parties and the EPP's Impact on Their Attitudes towards the EU

	Relations with the European People's Party (EPP)	Impact on party attitudes towards the EU	
		Direct	Indirect
SERBIA			
G17 Plus/United Regions of Serbia (URS)	Associate member since 2005 Observer member (2003–2005)	Low impact	Low impact
Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS)	It withdrew from the EPP in 2012 Associate member (2005–2012) Observer member (2003–2005)	Low impact	Low impact
Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina (SVM)	Observer member since 2007	–	–
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)	It wants to join the EPP Member of the EPP's group in the Council of Europe since 2013	Low impact	Intention to join the EPP may have somewhat contributed to party transformation since 2008
New Serbia (NS)	It wants to join the EPP	Low impact	Some impact due to party international isolation between 2008 and 2010
CROATIA			
Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)	Full member since 2013 Associate member (2004–2013) Observer member (2002–2004)	Low impact	Significant impact of the EPP on reinforcing party's pro-European attitudes in the early 2000s
Croatian Peasants' Party (HSS)	Full member since 2013 Associate member (2007–2013) Observer member (2002–2007)	Low impact	Low impact
Croatian Party of Rights (HSP)	Intended to join the EPP in the mid-2000 No intention of joining any transnational party since that time	Low impact	Low impact
Croatian Party of Rights Ante Starčević (HSP AS)	On the HDZ (EPP) slate for the EP elections in 2013 and 2014 Applied for membership in the AECR in early 2014, but lost international affiliation in late 2014 following the resignation of the party president and MEP Former party president joined the Croatian Conservative Party (HKS) in 2015 as a member of the AECR	Low impact	Low impact

Source: EPP (2015) and interviews with senior party officials.

The case of these Serbian and Croatian parties also suggests that national parties in Central and Eastern Europe tend to join European transnational party federations primarily for pragmatic and strategic reasons, while ideological closeness or loyalty to the principles that underlie these party federations were of secondary importance. Finally, the table shows the limited direct impact of the EPP on the attitudes of Serbian and Croatian members towards the EU,

with more significant indirect impact in the cases of former hard Eurosceptic parties struggling to obtain European legitimacy after years of nationalist and anti-European policies.

5. Serbian and Croatian Parties' Attitudes towards the EU and Their Relations with the EPP

Given a variance in relationship between the EPP and Serbian/Croatian parties as shown in Table 2, the examination of these linkages may provide insights into the extent to which transnational parties can affect party responses to Europe. While the EPP was the logical ideological and programme choice for the DSS and both Croatian parties, the affiliation of the G17 Plus/URS was the result of the party's pragmatic assessment and political calculation. Even though this was a liberal centre-right party, the party leadership opted for the most influential, not the closest, European transnational party, which reflected the party's pragmatic nature. The G17 Plus/URS initially did consider joining the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). However, as the former party vice president, Suzana Grubješić (Interview with Suzana Grubješić 2011), explained, 'this transnational party has proved to be too autistic', meaning they were not interested in this Serbian party. Grubješić pointed out that it was 'very important for the party to be close to the major national parties from the EPP that make all key decisions'. The fact that programmatic closeness was not a reason for the party's transnational affiliations was confirmed by Grubješić, who wondered 'what kind of ideological closeness the G17 Plus/URS has with the German Christian Democratic Union, which dedicates half of its programme to God and God's creations'. As with the majority of Serbian parties, the international affiliation of this party was therefore a result of circumstances and utilitarian assessment rather than ideological closeness to their European counterparts.³

At the programmatic level, this study found no evidence of any significant direct EPP impact on these parties' stances on the substance of European integration. This may be because this European transnational party federation did not directly require (potential) members to explicitly endorse the model of the EU it advocated in their programmes.⁴ While the statute (EPP 2011a) stated that EPP members have an obligation 'to promote the process of unification and federal integration in Europe as a constituent element of the European Union', it did not elaborate further on party members' obligations in this regard.

More importantly, it seems that the EPP itself struggled to formulate its preferred model for European integration and, as a result, did not strictly impose this requirement on applicant parties. Its previous 1992 programme (EPP 2011b) specifically called for 'a gradual, but resolute, transformation of the European Community into a genuine political union on a federal model'. In line with its traditionally federalist view of Europe, the programme stated that 'a federal Europe is now more than ever a necessary and realistic political objective' and that 'only a federal organization of Europe can match the aspirations and interests of Europeans who want to share a common destiny' (EPP 2011b). However, the 2012 party platform (EPP 2012) is much more cautious on the issue and contains no reference to a federal Europe. Instead, it puts emphasis on the role of national states and the principle of subsidiarity, since 'the European Union must also restrict itself' to those tasks which cannot be adequately dealt with at lower levels (EPP 2012). In a move away from a federalist concept, the EPP

now calls only for ‘gradual – but resolute – progress towards a genuine political union’ and that the Union and the Member States should exercise more powers jointly. This shift away from a federalist model may be motivated by the difficulty in getting a growing, diverse membership (Hanley 2002) to agree on this model, as well as the unpopularity of the federal concept following the 2008 economic crisis and the rise of public Euroscepticism across the continent.

Serbian and Croatian members have never fully elaborated their stances on the substance of European integration. The HDZ’s 2002 programme included a brief reference to the principle of subsidiarity, saying nothing about a federal model of Europe. It specified that, ‘like other European peoples’ parties, it advocates that the devolution of powers to supranational institutions or organizations can be realized only on the principle of subsidiarity, so that national competencies would not be unnecessarily internationalized’ (HDZ 2002: 28). However, after these early attempts to determine its position, the party has not dealt with this issue in its subsequent programmes. Even the party’s electoral manifestos for the 2013 and 2014 European elections in Croatia contained no reference to a preferred form for the EU to take, except for a vague call for ‘a strong and united Europe’ (HDZ 2014). Similarly, the HSS did not have an elaborated position on the substance of European integration, although it often employed Eurosceptic rhetoric and expressed a sceptical attitude towards the common agricultural policy of the EU. However, the party also argued for greater European monetary integration and control of the banking system, as well as stronger fiscal integration and control of the budgetary policies of Member States, which it called ‘achievements of European development that Croatia must accept’ (Novotny 2012).

The key issue for these parties was, however, their stance on their countries’ membership in the EU. Even though the programmatic documents of the EPP did not directly require members to expressly advocate EU membership, one of the party’s objectives was ‘to promote the process of unification and integration in Europe’ (EPP 2011a). This was an important precondition for aspiring Balkan members. For (potential) candidate states, stances on joining the EU were essentially what Pridham (2008: 80) called ‘a commitment to European integration’, rather than allegiance to a federal Europe. At the programme level, all members of the EPP from Serbia and Croatia advocated EU accession and thus met this criterion. However, the EU stances taken by these national parties were less likely the consequence of the party federation’s requirements. They either resulted from a more or less firm ideological commitment to European integration irrespective of the EPP (the G17 Plus/URS, HSS), or were mostly strategically driven and reinforced by its indirect leverage (the HDZ).

When it comes to indirect impacts, the EPP started early with an attempt to influence parties in both countries. To that end, it set up the Western Balkan Democracy Initiative in 1999, aimed at establishing a channel of communication and cooperation, and assisting and encouraging the strengthening of democratic structures and the party-building process (Karamanlis 2006). Specifically, the party federation utilized four key instruments: fact-finding missions, seminars, inter-regional conferences and publications. But the results were rather varied. There are indications that the EPP played an important role in the transformation and European socialisation of the HDZ in the early 2000s. In stark contrast, it failed to exert any influence on the DSS and the party’s negative attitudes post-2008 towards Serbian EU membership.

The EPP and its members have proven to be an important factor in the ideological transformation of the HDZ. During the 1990s, it was largely perceived as nationalist, with questionable democratic and European credentials. It did not explicitly oppose Croatian EU accession, but did pursue a nationalist political agenda and had a pronounced negative stance on EU policy towards Croatia and the Western Balkans, as well as the conditions for Croatian accession to the EU (Jović 2006). Following the electoral defeat of its autocratic founder, Franjo Tuđman, the party embarked on a gradual ideological transformation, led by its new, moderate leader, Ivo Sanader. Until 2002, Sanader maintained a rather nationalist political outlook and strongly opposed cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which was the key precondition for Croatian EU accession. However, after emerging victorious from an intra-party conflict with the hard-line nationalists, he declared accession to the EU the party's principal goal.

There are strong indications that the EPP played an important role in the party's ideological transformation, given that Sanader forged unusually strong links with this party federation that in turn impacted the stances he took and the policies he pursued. Although it is difficult to assess whether these linkages triggered or reinforced the party's reorientation process, they certainly contributed to it. The linkages grew out of the EPP's interest in expanding its influence in the Western Balkans, as well as the HDZ's strong intention to obtain European legitimisation. However, the key reasons for Sanader's intention to get closer and forge strong relations with the EPP and its members was the important role played by these 'external veto actors', to the extent they could have effectively prevented the party from coming to power had it not transformed.⁵

The EPP's enthusiasm to 'transform' the HDZ was not a surprise given that, at that time, the European party federation had no members in the region. As Karamanlis (2006: 58) has argued, after the democratic changes in Serbia and Croatia in 2000, the EPP promptly realised that the future of the Western Balkans lay with the EU and that the transformation of these societies into well-functioning democracies should be its foremost priority. At a result, it amended its statutes in 2001 and, for the first time, permitted the non-EU Western Balkan parties to join. Importantly, the EPP also strategically supported Sanader in the intra-party conflict with nationalist factions in 2002. As a result, a few months later, the HDZ became an observing member and eventually, in 2004, an associate member of the EPP. It became a full member when Croatia joined the EU in 2013.

As Mirjana Mladineo (Interview with Mirjana Mladineo 2011), a former political advisor to former Croatian president Ivo Josipović, argued, 'Sanader was essentially the project of the EPP' and further specified that Sanader had 'absolutely fantastic relations with the EPP and its members, which strongly influenced the HDZ in the early 2000s'. Marija Pejčinović Burić (Interview with Marija Pejčinović Burić 2011), a senior official of the HDZ and former members of the parliament (MP), also pointed out that Sanader personally played a key role in developing strong ties with national parties that were members of the EPP. The success of the party's transformation was directly related to these linkages, since, as Pejčinović Burić (Interview with Marija Pejčinović Burić 2011) explained, 'Sanader fascinated his counterparts from the EPP by strong charisma and consequently managed easily and swiftly to prove the new party orientation to members of the party federation'. Sanader (2006) himself argued the HDZ had used its years in opposition to undertake internal reform, with the aim of bringing the party in line with

EPP standards. He pointed out that the conferences and seminars organised by the EPP helped the party renew itself and re-emphasise its European orientation, which was conducive to its victory in the 2003 parliamentary elections. Moreover, the strong links forged with members of the party federation, especially the German Christian Democrats and the Austrian People's Party, helped facilitate the transfer of knowledge and expertise to the HDZ (Sanader 2006).

Close bilateral relations, in the framework of the EPP, played an important role in re-socialising some of the party's nationalist and Eurosceptic officials, who felt betrayed by a Europe that had not done enough to support the Croatian independence war. However, as Pejčinović Burić (Interview with Marija Pejčinović Burić 2011) pointed out, some party members still strongly disagreed with the The Hague Tribunal and thus continued to express negative attitudes towards Croatian EU accession. But this appears not to have been a problem in the party, since there was strong inter-party discipline and party members were obliged to follow the decisions of the leadership. Factions opposed to EU accession either toned down their objections or left the HDZ to form a new party. Therefore, the indirect impact of the EPP on the HDZ was important at an early stage of its transformation; however, as Haughton and Fisher (2008) argued, it would be inaccurate to see the EPP as the only driver of change. They claimed change was rather driven by a combination of defeat at the polls and a desire for international respectability that led the party to rethink its political orientation and attempt to re-brand itself as a mainstream European centre-right party.

On the other side, the conservative DSS is a prime example of a party immune to transnational influences. In other words, this party shows the limitations of the influence of European transnational party federations on their member parties. The DSS obtained observer status in the EPP in 2003 relatively easily and associate membership status in 2005. As one of the leading parties behind the overthrow of the Milošević regime in 2000 and an advocate for Serbian EU membership, this party did not have to prove its democratic and pro-EU credentials. It was also ideologically closed to the EPP, since the fundamental party principles included: support for the Serbian Orthodox Church; preservation of traditional moral values as the foundation of the family, society and the state; protection of national identity and self-awareness; and the strengthening of national cultural institutions (DSS 2010).

However, following the 2008 recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by major EU countries, the party started to oppose Serbian EU membership. Furthermore, in 2011, the DSS adopted a policy of military and political neutrality. This had a significant negative impact on the party's international relations and the party found itself, as its former vice president and MP, Slobodan Samardžić (Interview with Slobodan Samardžić 2011), explained, 'in international isolation or semi-isolation'. It had a particularly troublesome relationship with the EPP. The main issue was the fact that this party believed that, given the EU's position on Kosovo, Serbia should remain outside the process of European integration. On the other hand, leading members of the EPP expressed strong support for Kosovo's independence. They called on Serbia to 'free itself from the illusions of renewed influence over Kosovo that hold it back, and instead go down the road towards Europe' (Posselt 2010). As a result, the DSS had long been on the verge of suspension and expulsion from the EPP, and it finally decided to withdraw its membership in early 2012. On that occasion, the party stated:

The Democratic Party of Serbia is no longer able to be member of the European People's Party, because of our decision that Serbia should declare political neutrality [given that the EU

implements the policy of an independent Kosovo]. Our formal abandonment of the European People's Party means that the Democratic Party of Serbia will co-operate with European centre-right parties on a new basis, taking into account our mutual interests. (DSS 2012)

This was the culmination of the long 'misunderstanding' between the two sides. On one hand, the party argued that it is 'a fundamentally pro-European party, which respects the core European and democratic principles that the EPP rests upon' as argued by its former international secretary and MP, Nikola Lazić (Interview with Nikola Lazić 2011). He pointed out that the main values of the EPP are indisputable, given that one of the key European values is respect for territorial integrity. Therefore, the DSS argued that its position on Kosovo issues was in line with the key principles of the EPP; however, the party federation abandoned this principle only when it came to Serbian territorial integrity, according to Lazić. Consequently, Samardžić (Interview with Slobodan Samardžić 2011) claimed, 'the DSS has been under suspicion, because it does not want to play by the rules imposed by the EU'.

On the other hand, important members of the EPP perceived the DSS as 'a nightmare' and regretted having allowed it to become a member, as explained by its MEP and chair of the EP's Delegation for Southeastern Europe, Doris Pack (Interview with Doris Pack 2011). She specifically argued that the DSS has never been pro-European, 'although the party leader, Koštunica, gave the impression that he would respect reality and I thought we should give him a chance'. Pack further explained that:

By being an observer member of the European People's Party, this party should have gotten the smell of Europe. They had a chance to speak with other leaders and that should have opened up their minds, but they behaved autistically. It did not work. They did not use the chance they had. It was lost time and lost efforts. It makes me furious. We have to kick them out. (Interview with Doris Pack 2011)

In other words, 'European socialisation' which, as perceived by the EPP, includes *de facto* acceptance of the Kosovo independence, did not work in the case of this party. The then-president of the EPP, Wilfried Martens, tried to influence the party's policies on a number of occasions. After the 2008 election, Martens (2008) argued that despite the reservations expressed during the emotionally-charged election campaign over EU foreign policy decisions, Koštunica would accept the European choice that was clearly expressed by the citizens of Serbia. Martens added that Koštunica is 'a great patriot' who 'will make the patriotic choice, which is the European choice' (Martens 2008: 211).

However, the DSS remained impervious to the influence of the EPP, and its perception of the national interest was in direct opposition to the policies pursued by the majority of members of the party federation. This points to the limited impact of the EPP when faced by parties with principled, ideologically driven stances on what European values entail, as well as members for whom transnational party membership is not a high priority. Specifically, the position of the DSS on the EU and Kosovo was a principled one. This party even compromised its electoral performance because of its Kosovo politics⁶ and the weak incentives from being a member of the EPP certainly did not outweigh the party's convictions. Unlike the majority of other Serbian parties, this party did not feel the need to prove its loyalty to the principles of democracy and European values or to get European legitimacy by being a member of a European transnational party federation. The DSS did not attach great importance to its membership in the EPP. Its former vice president, Miloš Jovanović (Interview with

Miloš Jovanović 2011), argued ‘nobody has ever heard of European party federations in other countries; it is only in Serbia that membership in these organisations is seen as important, additional legitimacy for political parties’. But the party forged links with international partners that either shared its position on Kosovo (the major Russian parties) or its Euroscepticism (the AECR).

6. Parties Intending to Join the EPP

A peculiar feature of Serbian party politics is that there have been three mainstream parties with no transnational affiliations. These were the SPS, which aimed to join the PES, as well as the SNS and the NS, whose goal was membership in the EPP. The space for direct or indirect influence by European transnational party federations appears to have been greatest in the case of these parties, which sought membership primarily as part of a search for European legitimacy.

Since 2008, the SNS has undergone a rapid fundamental transformation in both its ideology and its attitudes towards the EU. Even though party leaders had avowed pronounced Euroscepticism for almost twenty years within the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka*, SRS) – with occasionally moderated rhetoric in the mid-2000s – they founded the SNS on a radically new, pro-European platform and became firm advocates of Serbian EU membership. After its ideological reinvention, the SNS expressed its intentions to join the EPP.⁷ In 2013, the party was admitted to the political group of the EPP in the Council of Europe, but has not been granted membership in the party federation. Its potential European partners, particularly those from the former Yugoslavia, showed a high level of scepticism towards the party leaders, given that they had long advocated nationalist, anti-European politics. As a consequence, the party has yet to prove its European orientation and to become a legitimate centre-right party.

Moreover, the SNS signed a cooperation agreement with the Eurosceptic Austrian Freedom Party in 2011, which envisaged ‘the creation of a Europe of free nations and self-determined people in the framework of a grouping of national sovereign states’ (SNS-FPO 2011). It seems, therefore, that the SNS stood at that time for the radical transformation of the EU and intergovernmental cooperation among sovereign European states. This agreement also provided for the establishment of a new political party at the European level – ‘A free European movement’. This party’s initial controversial and confusing international relations were primarily a reflection of its eclectic, weakly-rooted ideological underpinnings and lack of firm fundamental principles. On the other hand, the EPP carefully monitored the actions and attitudes of the SNS. Pack (Interview with Doris Pack 2011) argued its policies were what were most important. She said, ‘the EPP will be very careful. We should wait and see. Their membership was not an immediate question. We made a mistake with Koštunica, because we believed that it would help to learn a bit more about Europe. We should not make a second mistake’.

The party programme (SNS 2011: 41) clearly stated the party supported the European integration process aimed at the institutional and economic strengthening of Serbia, and that it believed that Serbian EU accession was in the best, long-term interests of all citizens. The

support for Serbian EU membership was, however, couched in instrumental, utilitarian terms, since the party perceived the EU primarily as a key economic partner that could contribute to a better life for ordinary people (SNS 2011). As expected, the SNS did not express a detailed opinion on the substance of European integration, that is, on what kind of EU the party would favour.

The decision by SNS leaders to take a radically new position and start advocating Serbian accession to the EU was highly pragmatic and strategic. Although there was no indication that this was due to the party's intention to join the EPP, this factor may have contributed to the party's overall ideological reorientation. As a strategically driven party, the SNS was inclined to accommodate foreign demands, although this was more related to the pressures of Western ambassadors than demands by the EPP. Following the party's reorientation, the need to become a legitimate European party became an important driver of further transformation. Joining the EPP would be the ultimate proof of its transformation. As a result, the SNS clearly wished to prove that it was a new, pro-European party that had nothing to do with the nationalist SRS. As explained by Damjan Jović (Interview with Damjan Jović 2011), a member of the party's executive committee, 'the party specifically strove to present itself as a predictable, everyday partner to EPP members, as well as to eliminate the prejudice and antagonism due to the ignorance of some EPP members'. This stemmed from the party's pro-European commitment (along with its democratic and post-Yugoslav commitments related to the party's overall position on the legacy the post-Yugoslav wars) being called into question by its potential European partners.

Finally, the party programme of the second Serbian party that intended to join the EPP, the NS, surprisingly stated its attitudes towards the substance of European integration. It argued that the party sought to join and strengthen European institutions by supporting the transformation of the European Union from 'a commercial society' to 'political society' (NS 2010: 3). The ultimate goal of this party was 'a federal Europe based on the solidarity and unity of nations and citizens, in which all nations would preserve their national and cultural identity' (NS 2010: 3). But there were no signs the party was really invested in these principles, given an absolute lack of reference to the substance of European integration in its rhetoric or practical policies.

The party has, though, changed its attitude on Serbian EU integration twice since 2008. It was a prime example of a party driven by strategic electoral considerations. Specifically, the 2005 programme (NS 2010: 3) expressed the party's pro-European orientation, stating that the party believed Serbia belongs to 'the United Europe not only geopolitically, but also by virtue of its entire history and cultural heritage'. It thus supported Serbian EU membership until the 2008 Kosovo declaration of independence, when it took a strong Eurosceptic position and argued against Serbian accession to the EU. It opposed signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU and accused the government of betraying crucial national interests. However, it again shifted stances on the issue in 2010, abandoned its coalition with the DSS and returned to a pro-EU position out of fear of political marginalisation.

The party expressed its intention to join the EPP and sent a formal membership request in 2011, but the EPP did not reply. The party's transformation may to some extent be seen as part of its wish to position itself as a pro-European, centre-right party potentially eligible for EPP membership. But a bigger contribution to the party's transformation came from its

isolation from representatives of the EU institutions once it adopted a Eurosceptic stance. As Dubravka Filipovski (Interview with Dubravka Filipovski 2011), the party vice president and an MP, emphasised, ‘although no one pressured the party to take a pro-European stance, the fact that nobody contacted, or showed an interest in talking to party officials strongly contributed to its re-transformation’. She specified, ‘the party had to change, although there were no pressures. However, as soon as the party shifted policies, contacts with EU institutions and foreign ambassadors were re-established’.

7. Parties Not Intending to Join the EPP

The HSP and the HSP AS, two nationalist Eurosceptic parties born of a common political heritage that opposed Croatian EU membership, had had some interaction with the EPP. The HSP abandoned attempts to join the EPP but the HSP AS had no intention of joining the European transnational party federation — it only ran for the European elections on its slate.

Both parties adopted the same founding principle in their programmes: strong opposition to any inter-state union or supranational organisation, arguing that ‘any form of state union with other countries and nations is unacceptable without the consent of the Croatian people’, whose fundamental right is to have a fully sovereign and independent state (HSP 2012, HSP AS 2010). The HSP therefore believed that accession to any state union that would endanger Croatian sovereignty was impermissible and unnecessary given the Croats’ nine-century-long struggle for independence (HSP 2010). Party leaders claimed ‘the aim of European bureaucracy is to subdue the independent and sovereign state’ and that the EU was not a community of states, but rather a centralised system of wealth extraction from the periphery to the centre that destroys the economies of small countries (HSP 2013b). It therefore pledged ‘to fight a federal Europe’ (HSP 2013a). Moreover, in early 2011, ‘when the negative results of the accession negotiations had become public’, the HSP adopted a policy of outright opposition to Croatian EU membership and called on Croatian citizens to vote against it in a referendum on EU accession (Interview with Daniel Srb 2011).

The HSP did not develop any significant multilateral or bilateral relations. The party had no international party affiliation, although in 2006 it did apply for membership in the EPP, a request the party federation never answered. Party president Daniel Srb (Interview with Daniel Srb 2011) claimed, ‘although the party federation was extraordinarily influential’, his party was no longer seeking membership. Srb explained that ‘obtaining membership is an arduous process. It hangs on the biggest member in the country, that is, the HDZ, and the HSP does not wish to depend on the HDZ’. In the run-up to the first Croatian EP elections in 2013, the party was supported by the French National Front.

Conversely, the HSP AS ran successfully on the HDZ (and thus the EPP) slate for the EP in 2013 and 2014, although it never intended to join the party federation. To the contrary, the EPP was harshly critical of the decision to appear on a common slate with HDZ. Its president, Joseph Daul, warned that ‘candidates on the EPP’s list must share the same values. And people on our list must join our political group in the EP’ (Daul 2014). He added that ‘she [Ruža Tomašić, former party president] cannot be elected on the list of the EPP. You cannot be elected based on values that you do not defend. If you are a Eurosceptic, you have to be

elected on the list of Eurosceptics. You cannot be elected in accordance with European values and then move to the side of Eurosceptics' (Daul 2014). Nevertheless, after the HDZ resisted these pressures, given the popularity of Tomašić with the Croatian electorate, she remained on the EPP's slate and secured an MEP position. Tomašić did not moderate its nationalist and Eurosceptic attitudes, and affiliated with the Eurosceptic AECR group in the EP. The HSP AS officially applied for membership in the alliance in April 2014. Tomašić left the HSP AS in November 2014 and joined the newly formed Croatian Conservative Party (*Hrvatska Konzervativna Stranka*, HKS), becoming its president in March 2015. As a result, the HSP AS lost its representation in the EP as well as membership in the AECR. In summary, these two Croatian parties were typical of radical right-wing, mostly ideologically driven Eurosceptic parties that proved immune to the impact of mainstream European party federations.

8. Conclusion

Few studies in the comparative literature have systematically investigated the patterns of party transnational linkages as a factor shaping the response of contemporary parties to Europe. This article specifically set out to do so, by conducting a comparative analysis of the positions of Serbian and Croatian parties on European integration in the light of their international affiliations with the EPP. The most important empirical and conceptual findings are summarised in this section.

First, the EPP regularly checked the programmatic 'EU commitments' of its applicants, which proved to be a precondition for developing any meaningful relations with national parties from EU-candidate countries. These parties were also closely scrutinised according to a set of democratic principles (democratic conditionality). Ideological closeness proved to be of secondary importance, both due to the flexibility of the EPP and the lack of firm ideological underpinnings among Western Balkan parties. An additional region-specific requirement entailed that candidates have good relationships with neighbouring former Yugoslav parties from the EPP as well as their overall position on the legacy the post-Yugoslav wars. This 'post-Yugoslav principle' proved of great importance, in particular for Serbian parties that have so far been unsuccessful in pursuing EPP membership or have withdrawn their applications because of conflicting views over the consequences of post-Yugoslav wars (precisely the status of Kosovo).

Second, for Western Balkan applicants, 'EU commitments' were primarily related to their countries' EU membership, rather than their attitudes towards the substance of European integration. This was due to the lack of any explicit EPP requirement to endorse a specific EU model, as well as its recent shift away from the federal model it had traditionally endorsed. This lowered its leverage over applicants regarding the issue. The study therefore found no programme adaptations involving party views on a preferred EU model traceable to direct EPP impact. No Serbian or Croatian party had developed a stance on the substance of European integration, but this did not prevent some parties from applying or actually becoming EPP members. This finding is in line with the scholarly argument that the EPP did not actually employ a rigid strategy regarding a federal model in the case of non-EU applicants (Timuş 2014). Conversely, opposition to EU membership had significant consequences for parties'

relations with the EPP – it provoked the DSS to renounce its membership, the NS to shun any contact, and the HSP to be rejected for membership.

Third, it was difficult to directly trace changes in party positions on EU membership to direct EPP requirements. This seeming lack of influence may once again be due to the fact that the EPP did not formally require its members to take an affirmative programme stance on EU membership, even though in reality it very carefully monitored this aspect of parties' pro-EU commitment. Additionally, some national parties formed their mostly affirmative stances on this issue long before joining the EPP (the G17 plus/URS, HSS) and the EPP did not, therefore, have motives or reasons to influence them. Other parties were impervious to potential EPP leverage because of their ideologically driven positions on EU membership and the low level of significance of transnational affiliations (the DSS, HSP and HSP AS). Overall, the direct effect of the EPP on Serbian and Croatian parties' attitudes towards the EU, as seen in adjustments made to their programmes, appears to have been minimal to non-existent.

Fourth, although indirect effects were more difficult to disentangle, such indirect leverage over party attitudes towards EU membership and their overall ideological underpinnings seemed significant for some Serbian and Croatian parties. As shown in Table 2, these were former Eurosceptic parties that strategically abandoned their positions, reorienting themselves towards the pro-European pole. Although it was difficult to assess whether the wish to obtain an international affiliation motivated party shifts or whether they stemmed from previous decisions to change, the data strongly suggested that indirect EPP impact was a crucial driver of change for the HDZ, as well as an important factor in the transformation of the SNS and, to some extent, the NS. These parties appear to have been motivated largely by a strong intention to break away from long-term international (semi-) isolation, to establish contacts with mainstream European parties and, most importantly, to join the EPP to obtain European legitimacy and international respectability. Crucially, since key EPP members were essentially 'external veto players' – i.e. influential officials of Western governments and the EU – by forging close relations with them, former Eurosceptics in both countries effectively forestalled their being cut out of government participation. Additionally, the EPP decision to expand its membership and brought its influence in new regions proved important, since it had no members from the Western Balkans until the transformation of the HDZ led to its membership in 2002.

This study represents a limited analysis specifically focused on Serbian and Croatian party responses to Europe in connection with their transnational affiliations with the EPP. The next logical step would be to look at other potential EPP-induced changes within these parties, such as their ideological and general programme transformations and organisational modifications attributable to transnational links. Other potential issues to be examined are: how different stages of the process of accession to European transnational parties may have shaped these national parties, the role played by EPP foundations traditionally active in the Western Balkans and, particularly, the consequences of the Croatian accession to the EU and the accordingly closer interaction of its parties with other EU parties and institutions. The ultimate goal would be to examine comparatively two other leading party federations with members in the region – the PES and the ALDE – to provide more comprehensive insight into the transnational activism of contemporary political parties on the European periphery.

List of abbreviations:

AECR	Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
DS	Democratic Party
DSS	Democratic Party of Serbia
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
HDZ	Croatian Democratic Union
HKS	Croatian Conservative Party
HSS	Croatian Peasants' Party
HSP	Croatian Party of Rights
HSP AS	Croatian Party of Rights Ante Starčević
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
NS	New Serbia
PES	Party of European Socialists
SI	Socialist International
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SPS	Socialist Party of Serbia
SRS	Serbian Radical Party
SVM	Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina
URS	United Regions of Serbia

Notes:

1. The article does not examine the SVM (Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina, *Savez Vojvodjanskih Madjara*), which is a minority party with observer status in the EPP. As such, it is less likely that the EPP had any significant impact on this party.
2. After a radical change of policies and adoption of the pro-EU platform in 2008, the SPS expressed its intention to join the SI and the PES, which became a key goal explicitly stated in the party programme. Nevertheless, the party found it difficult to develop good relations with Western Balkan members of the PES, and scepticism towards the SPS is still present. As a result, it has not yet secured any international affiliation.
3. The case of the Democratic Party (*Demokratska Stranka*, DS) in Serbia is very illustrative in this respect. This party was founded as a centre-right, liberal party, which started shifting towards centre-left after coming to power in 2000. It became a member of the SI in 2003 and an associate member of the PES in 2008. The then-party president, Zoran Djindjić, personally pushed to strengthen social-democratic values in the party, assuming that membership in the PES – which, at that time, had a majority in the EP – would bolster the DS's credibility.
4. The EPP used to have a list of membership criteria, which included requirements that a party must make 'special reference in the party programme to European integration based on the federal model' and that it must acknowledge the principle of subsidiarity. These requirements were introduced in 1996, but they were later abolished (Timuş 2011: 8).

5. The same mechanism has seemed evident in the rapid transformation of the SNS and the SPS since 2008.
6. The DSS failed to enter the Serbian Parliament following the 2014 general elections, which led to the intra-party split and the consequent resignation of its founder and long-term president, Vojislav Koštunica.
7. It is expected that the SNS will submit an official application for associate membership in the EPP in early 2015.

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- Interview with Suzana Grubješić, Former Serbian deputy PM for European integration and vice president, G17 plus/United Regions of Serbia, Belgrade, April 2011.
- Interview with Miloš Jovanović, Former vice president, Democratic Party of Serbia, Belgrade, March 2011.
- Interview with Nikola Lazić, Former international secretary, Democratic Party of Serbia, Belgrade, March 2011.
- Interview with Mirjana Mladineo, Former political adviser to the former Croatian president Ivo Josipović for the EU and Croatian ambassador to the United Nations, Zagreb, May 2011.
- Interview with Doris Pack, Former MEP (EPP/Germany) and chair of the EP Delegation for the South Eastern Europe, Brussels, July 2011.
- Interview with Marija Pejčinović Burić, Former state secretary of the Croatian ministry of European integration and MP, Croatian Democratic Union, Zagreb, May 2011.
- Interview with Slobodan Samardžić, Former vice president and MP, Democratic Party of Serbia, Belgrade, March 2011.
- Interview with Daniel Srb, Party president and former MP, Croatian Party of Rights, Zagreb, May 2011.