Manifesto for a “European” Political Group

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Ideas Factory (IF) is a European platform that aims to produce thought-provoking ideas, generate stimulating debate and provide useful inputs to policy-making at Union and national level. IF is distinctive: it is the only forum in Brussels where young professionals can meet and exchange views on topical issues linked to the future of Europe.

IF aims not only to be responsive to developments in EU politics, but to anticipate the policy agenda drawing on the insight, expertise and creativity of its members. Solid arguments and workable solutions are analysed and debated, then submitted to policy-makers to inspire their thinking.

IF is supported by the EPC, and is coordinated by Giovanni Grevi. For more information on IF, please contact Giovanni at G.Grevi@theepc.be
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In the aftermath of European elections, a ghost haunts the corridors of the European Parliament (EP): a new political formation in the making. Welcomed by some, feared by others, a new political group with a strong European ‘soul’ at the centre of the EP might change the rules of the political game in the EU. There is no shortage of obstacles and reservations: the traditional consensual nature of EU policy-making does not encourage stronger polarisation in the political debate. If anything, some argue that party-political opposition in the EP increasingly runs along the left-right divide familiar to national systems, rather than the ‘more or less Europe’ divide.

Ideas Factory Europe (IF) thanks Sandro Gozi\(^1\) for making the first concrete case for the much-discussed creation of a new political formation which would be supportive of a progressive agenda at the European level. Sandro moves the debate on with some concrete, provocative proposals. He outlines what should be the political priorities of this political group, and how it should function, with a view to building a truly European party.

While, of course, not endorsing any partisan political position, IF believes that this is a worthwhile contribution to better understanding some of the driving forces shaping the new EP. This controversial Idea is certain to be challenged by other members of IF, and in the wider debate. More Ideas will follow, anticipating political developments in the EP, from different perspectives, with a view to enriching the essential party political debate at the supra-national level.

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Opening Statement

Europe has made substantial progress since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 2004, it has achieved the most ambitious and important challenge in its history, with the enlargement to 10 new democracies. But it still needs to develop a real European political arena. National debates on Europe are deceiving if not misleading. The European elections are fought mainly on national issues and used as a sort of popularity test for the parties in power or to express dissatisfaction with national policies.

Beyond the recent rhetoric of some national parties or coalitions, a clear will to develop a European political establishment has not emerged yet. European democracy badly needs a new political approach to integration, which should start with the creation of political parties at the European level.

Within the new European Parliament, this would mean creating a new, pro-integration, group, which would develop a new political action to help the Parliament to take a qualitative leap forward, so as to become a less technical and more political institution. The new group should shake current balances and create new alliances within the Parliament, becoming the first prototype of a genuine pro-European political party.

It would not just be a collection of national actors, but rather a trans-European political force open to all those – be they private citizens, national parties, associations and movements - who are fully committed to European integration as the only effective way to meet the challenges facing Europe internally and externally.
Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is still quite different from national parliaments:

- European elections have an influence on the nature and the functioning of the European Parliament but are still mainly fought on the basis of national issues;

- the participation rate in the elections is decreasing, mainly due to the fact that voters do not see the real issues at stake (no government or opposition), and because they feel that their vote will not lead to the appointment of a “government of Europe”;

- the European Parliament does not have the power to initiate legislation: this is mainly the prerogative of the Commission;

- the European Parliament shares powers to adopt legislation with the Council, composed of members of governments who are not primarily elected - contrary to Higher Houses in some federal systems - to legislate at the European level;

- the European Parliament does not have any “tax and spend” capacity. Thus it has little means to develop and deliver redistributive policies, which constitute the basis for political divisions and voter participation at the national level.

Legislative majorities within the EP are more fluid and comprehensive than national ones. These majorities are formed along several “lines”:

- national and transnational interests;
- party interests; and
- government and opposition interests.

This is why in some cases single-issue majorities are horizontal, and formed irrespectively of traditional party coalitions and affiliations.

As a result, the EP is not perceived as a political arena where a new political project can be developed (with influence over the national arenas and a decisive impact on European politics). Yet, recent developments, including the Constitutional Treaty and the political momentum created by enlargement, strengthen its role, and European elections could be the occasion for a new political initiative.
Groups, coalitions or catch-all parties?

Although political affinity has always been the basis for creating a group at the EP, the current political groups are much more heterogeneous than national groups.

There are differences:

- between North and South;
- between East and West;
- between poor and rich countries;
- between government and opposition parties;
- between traditionally “pro-European” parties and parties for which Europe is not central to their strategy; and
- between political cultures and historical political traditions.

In short, there is no real “European political élite”: MEPs generally play a secondary role within their own parties and do not build their political career in and on Europe.

The degree of ideological and programmatic cohesion of existing political groups is still low, notably within the two main political groups (EPP and PSE), and will be even lower after the next European elections due to the impact of new parties from new Member States.

This heterogeneity makes it very difficult to analyse and understand the groups’ behaviour and discipline.

Existing studies aiming to prove that the political groups are becoming more cohesive and more like “national” political groups are based on insufficient data (roll call votes). The analysis of the structure of the existing political groups needs to be taken into account.

The three main groups at the European Parliament

The EPP in the last 15 years has followed an expansion strategy (from 27% in 1979 to 36% in 1999) – especially on its right – which has led it to become the largest political group in the EP. A pragmatic attitude has prevailed over the original federalist project, which had characterised the programmes of the Christian Democrats notably in Italy, Germany and Belgium.

The EPP has made a determined effort to strengthen its internal power structure and to favour new accessions (UK Tories, the Partido Popular and Forza Italia), which have led to growing internal dissent (e.g. Athens Group and Schuman Group).
Beyond declarations, it appears that the original federalist strategy is now just one of the political trends within the group, which is turning into a more “conservative style” political group. This trend will be strengthened with the entry of new political parties from the 10 new countries.

The PES has not followed the same enlargement strategy up until now (27% in 1979 – 27.7% in 1999), with the exception of the accession countries, and its fluctuations in size have been directly linked to the electoral results.

Yet, the socialist parties have shown a lukewarm attitude towards European integration, especially when they were in power in their own country (e.g. French PS or Labour). In addition, the northern social democrats seem to be reluctant to deepen integration in certain fields.

The ELDR, probably also because of its smaller size, seems to be the most coherent in terms of support for stronger integration. Internal divergences look weaker on issues such as the institutions, the role of Europe in the world; economic and social governance; sustainable development; the role of the regions; justice and security; and citizenship.

The traditional left-right divide is emerging in voting patterns at the EP but is still a secondary factor in the political debate. At this crucial stage in European politics, following enlargement and at a time when we are confronted with growing demands of security and welfare on the part of European citizens, the predominant divide will revolve around demands for more or less Europe.

What is currently lacking is a strong European force that is driven not by political concerns rooted at the national level but by the conviction that policy must be formulated in a new way, with the European dimension at its core. What is needed is a European political force capable of putting together those components from traditional groups, which are openly and highly committed to the further deepening of European integration.

At this stage, the European process is sufficiently mature to justify a new political realignment of groups in the EP and within European political parties, thereby stimulating political participation and mobilisation at the supranational level. European groups should undertake a process of internal reflection with a view to strengthening their internal cohesion and their intellectual and ideological coherence. As a result, it is likely that the new EP will organise itself around three major blocs: conservative, left and an “in-between” pro-integration bloc, with a smaller radical left and openly anti-European right groups.
Which programme for a new “European Political Group”? 

The new group should seek to build an alliance with the most reformist forces in order to achieve a political majority within the European Parliament. This alliance should exercise a direct impact on the election of the President of the EP and on the appointment of the President of the European Commission, and of the entire college. It should also exert influence on the vote on the new strategic political objectives presented by the new Commission for its five-year mandate.

The new “European Political Group” should challenge the inward-looking nature of EP politics, notably between the two major groups, the PES and the EPP. This group should assemble the “pro-Europe/Federalist” forces from the EP political spectrum. The new group would put the real deepening and the strengthening of European integration at the centre of its political programme.

It should contribute to make the EP more confrontational and, therefore, more “political”. By making party competition stronger, the new political formation would contribute to the development of a functioning European democracy, with parties competing to implement a political and legislative programme during the five year mandate. It would therefore contribute to the process of Union-building and citizens’ participation and inclusion. The new “European” group should tackle the issues central to the concerns of all European citizens (security, justice, environment, reform of the macroeconomic model, inter-cultural and multi-ethnic societies).

In so doing, it would help to promote the progressive Europeanisation of national party programmes in qualitative terms, including explicit references to the added value that the EU can bring to pursue domestic political programmes, and to the importance of European integration per se. The spill over from European to domestic politics, and vice-versa, might prove of special relevance and benefit for further political integration.

The new group would be the first truly transnational political group, based on a strong “pro-integration” linkage, social market economy and a political/federal vision of a Union endowed with adequate means, in terms of resources and institutional setting, to deliver its policies to European citizens and to speak with a single voice in the international arena.

The manifesto should mainly aim to enhance the social market economy model, and focus on European citizenship, economic governance, regionalisation, social and environmental policies, human capital, immigration and intercultural dialogue and strengthening of the EU Institutions.
European citizenship

The new group should aim to promote a new, more active concept of European citizenship by promoting direct and indirect forms of citizen participation in the European process (e.g. through deliberative polls at the European level and specific actions aimed at citizens, youth, students, trainees, volunteers etc). The group should be fully committed to the implementation of the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights.

In addition, the new group should propose the concept of European citizenship as a means to achieve the full integration of legal immigrants – whose status and rights as European citizens should be recognized. It should also promote various forms of intercultural dialogue, as an instrument for integrating migrants into European societies but also as the basis of a new concept of “cultural diplomacy” which the EU is best placed to promote, drawing from its own experience of voluntary cooperation and solidarity.

Reform of the European economic model

The new group should push for stronger European economic governance with the Commission at its core and a single international representation of the Euro. In this context, it should propose a far-reaching reform of the stability pact, with a view to favouring public investment in infrastructure, research and higher education, which are long-term but fundamental investments to ensure a prosperous future. The current approach is too narrow and formal: only structural deficits should be subject to the Maastricht criteria.

In the same spirit, the group should launch the idea of a “European budget law”, i.e. the organisation of parallel processes for the discussion and adoption of national budget laws.

The push for further liberalisation of the single market should be accompanied by a degree of re-regulation at the European level, through a networking system linking national and European agencies. Within this frame, the group should insist that competition policy is used as a tool for achieving competitiveness and the industrial objectives envisaged by the Lisbon process. This would include action to make the internal market more dynamic and open to new firms, as well as the revitalisation of old ones.

Coordination of social policies

There should be a focus on the needs of older people and of workers in companies undergoing restructuring, as well as on ensuring better equal opportunities between people and territories. Within this frame, the group should call for stronger EU action on family policies.
The group should defend the basic requirements of public utilities and, where necessary, propose the development of new policies at the European level, with a view to ensuring that a high level of social protection and services of general interest are guaranteed to all European citizens.

**Strengthened cooperation in taxation policies: towards the introduction of a European tax**

The group should not advocate the introduction of additional taxes but the replacement of current direct contributions by the Member States to the European budget with a European tax. This would, in time, make the EU financial system more understandable and transparent for citizens. At the same time, the group should fight to raise progressively the upper threshold of the budget currently devoted to the Union (1.24% of the EU GDP).

**Better organisation of territorial governance**

This could be achieved by favouring, as far as possible, direct cooperation between EU institutions and regional and local authorities, and by deepening the regionalisation of relevant common policies, building upon tripartite cooperation (State, region, EU institutions). The group should favour the consolidation of Euroregions and interregional and transnational cooperation, notably in the context of the new cohesion policy and with special attention to the needs of minorities within the enlarged Union. The group should take a step further and propose to establish “Proximity regions”, i.e. structured forms of regional cooperation between EU regions and regions of the neighbouring countries.

**Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy**

Reform should be pursued by insisting on rural development and on the production of quality products. Agricultural policies should be more directly linked to trade, neighbourhood and development policies. In particular, the group should aim towards the progressive opening of the European agricultural market to international trade and competition. It should also develop new European strategies linking rural development, tourism and culture.

The group should advocate full implementation of the Kyoto Protocol and pursue sustainable and environmental policies, within and outside the Union. A more stringent “environmental clause” should be included in EU trade, cooperation and association agreements. Within the Union, it should promote stronger environmental policies, by establishing common objectives, strict timetables and convergence procedures.

It should also strengthen the European dimension of consumer protection, public health and civil protection policies, on the basis of a stronger application of the precautionary principle.
Progressive integration of national administrations

The group should favour horizontal cooperation, mobility and exchanges between national administrations, strengthen the practice of administrative twinning and push for wider access of non-nationals to some sectors of public administration.

A truly European dimension of research and education policies

European centres of excellence should be created and developed. National university curricula should be further coordinated, in order to achieve full student mobility and higher education networks should be more integrated. The EU should encourage the organisation of new training schemes for teachers and professors, in order to deepen their European qualifications.

In addition, by further developing recent European initiatives such as Erasmus Mundus, the group should encourage the spread of the new “European Masters programmes” and promote the competitiveness and attractiveness of European universities, so as to turn Europe into an area of excellence for students from the rest of the world, notably from Asia. Finally, the group should favour cooperation between research centres, universities and private enterprises.

Deepen integration in the field of security, justice and criminal law

The group should push for stronger integration of common policies against terrorism and organised crime as rapidly as possible so as to achieve a real area of freedom, security and justice. This should be done notably by establishing a real European Borders Service and by creating joint specialised units at European level, dealing with the key problems on the agenda (drugs, money laundering, trafficking of human beings etc.). The parallel development of EU criminal law should also be at the core of the programme.

“Structural diplomacy”

The group should aim to fully exploit the external potential of the various European common policies, from energy to transport, from research to education, from trade to competition and monetary affairs, in order to develop a new model of “structural diplomacy”, linking the Union to other regions of the world through political, economic and cultural means.

In particular, the group should propose to create common institutions including the neighbouring countries and the European Economic Area, which could be joined also by countries which will not ratify the new Constitution.
More generally, the group should fight for majority voting and more democratic accountability of common foreign policy, and favour the deepening of common defence. The group should ask, in particular, for a single European representation in all the international organisations, notably the financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank. In due course, a single European voice in the United Nations should be established.

At the global level, the group should encourage stronger “public goods” policies, such as the fight against poverty and diseases, higher social and labour standards, women’s and children’s rights as well as minority rights.

**European Institutions**

The group should aim to strengthen the EU institutions by:

- organising more coherent executive action. The practice of creating new “Mr Something” or ad hoc bodies should stop. New executive and coordination competencies should be attributed to the Commission;

- exercising to the fullest extent the budgetary and legislative role of the European Parliament and its powers of political control over EU policy directions;

- supporting the use of “passerelle” clauses to achieve a generalisation of majority voting; and

- making an “exit clause” mechanism operational in case of non ratification of a new treaty by one or more countries, and proposing a simpler procedure than the Inter-governmental Conference to revise those parts of the Constitution that deal with policies.
How should a new European Political Group be structured?

The structure of the new group should reflect the idea of a truly “European” party, beyond the existing simple federations of national parties. A significant innovation, breaking with the current structure of political groups in the EP, would be to give national delegations a limited political role. In a truly trans-national group addressing issues at the European level, there is no need for national delegations to base policy decisions on a compromise of different and strictly national perspectives. Furthermore, this would break the link between the size of national delegations and the job share-out currently dependent on it. Jobs within the group (presidents, vice-presidents and chairs, rapporteurs) would be decided on merit rather than nationality.

The Group should consist of one or more European parties, either already established or new, but its direct membership (of either the parties or the group) should also be possible. This would create a link that is presently missing between European political parties and the citizens. It is an essential element in the forging of trans-national political actors and public mobilisation.

The Group, if it is to be influential, must work through consensual policy definition. It is only by developing a new political dialogue leading to common European positions on different issues, that the Group will be able to achieve the coherence and the consistency required within the EP structure to be credible, and to effectively exercise any leverage and influence on parliamentary activities.

The Group should aim to have a clear European identity and distinctiveness from existing political groups. It should therefore strike a balance between the obvious need for numbers and the indispensable coherence of its structure and programme. By doing so, it would also act as a catalyst to attract new members in a second phase, once the new group is well established and active on the parliamentary scene. To this end, it should not hesitate to refuse admission to parties and MEPs who do not fully share its ambitions for a stronger Europe.
Ideas do not necessarily reflect the views of individual members of Ideas Factory Europe (IF) and do not commit any of them. All members of IF share the common goal of producing fresh Ideas to push the confines of current thinking on the future of European integration further, and thus help to enrich and enliven the debate. Every contribution is agreed in a spirit of open and creative exchange.