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# National opposition parties within the inter-parliamentary conference on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT


While the institutional dimension of inter-parliamentary cooperation has been the subject of intense research, much less is known about the involvement of partisan actors, and more specifically of members of opposition parties. This article aims to bridge this gap by looking at the composition of parliamentary delegations to the meetings of the inter-parliamentary conference on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU (so-called ‘Article 13 Conference’, established by Art. 13 of the Fiscal Compact in 2012). It focuses on the involvement and attitude of opposition parties, in order to verify whether they take part to inter-parliamentary cooperation and with which approach.

**KEYWORDS** Inter-parliamentary cooperation; national parliaments; economic governance; opposition parties

## 1. Introduction

As established in Article 12 TEU and in the Protocol on the role of national parliaments in the EU, national parliaments actively contribute to the good functioning of the Union, including by engaging in inter-parliamentary cooperation with the EP (Article 12.f TEU and Protocol no 1). Indeed, perhaps the most important added value of having national parliaments involved at the supranational level – and what makes them different from national governments, acting within the Council’s bodies and the European Council –, is their ability to publicly express and represent a range of viewpoints, including those of the opposition and of the other political minorities (on the communication function of parliaments and the media in EU parliamentary affairs, see Auel, 2019).

This article aims to further expand the current understanding of inter-parliamentary cooperation in the EU by addressing the following queries: first, we open the ‘black box’ of national parliamentary delegations to the

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meetings of inter-parliamentary conferences (IPCs) in order to verify whether, and to what extent, the opposition parties are represented therein. Second, once this is established, we assess whether and in what ways they are active in IPC meetings. In doing this, we examine their attitude, that is, whether it is polemical/hostile (towards their own government or towards the EU in general) or rather cooperative/pro-European. Considering these matters will help us to better grasp the problem of representativeness and politicisation of the IPCs. By representativeness, we mean the capacity to create a link between the represented and the representatives, whereby the latter are meant to faithfully reflect the many points of view stemming from a specific polity. Representativeness of inter-parliamentary cooperation is empirically evaluated in relation to IPCs' capacity to include (national) opposition parties, and especially those displaying a Euro-sceptic rhetoric.

The participation of opposition parties in IPCs is assessed here by analysing the composition and activity of national parliaments' and the EP's delegations during the meetings of the most controversial of these fora, namely the conference on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU, the so-called 'Article 13 Conference', established by Art. 13 of the Fiscal Compact, i.e. the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG), and operating since 2013. Its very creation was contentious due to the breadth of the mandate it should have, its uncertain composition and its limited deliberative capacity. Moreover, the problematic purpose of this body is also controversial, considering the national parliaments' power of the purse and the fact that budgetary competences are only coordinated at the EU level (Cooper, 2016; Fromage, 2016; Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2021).

In this article, four of the conference's meetings will be analysed with regard to the behaviour of opposition parties (the composition is analysed in all IPCs): the one held in Rome in September 2014, that in Vienna in September 2018, that in Brussels in February 2020 (which took place during the European Parliamentary Week of that year), and finally, the virtual conference meeting, held in February 2021.

The Vienna conference was chosen because it came exactly four years after that of Rome, in a context that differed in many ways – both from the point of view of the economic cycle, still under stress in 2014 (while much better in 2018), and of the contrasting political conditions in some states – e.g. in Italy and Poland, countries in which Eurosceptic parties were in government in 2018. The other two conferences were chosen, respectively, as one is a post-economic crisis conference (Brussels 2020) and the other is the first online conference during the pandemic (Brussels 2021). We have carefully reviewed the videos, available on the internet, of the conferences (Rome, Vienna, twice Brussels) for the purpose of this

analysis. We will also analyze the composition of the delegations in relations to bicameralism.

This article only takes into consideration what was said by MPs from the opposition parties. In fact, the main objective is to observe how representatives of opposition parties behaved, what issues they addressed when they took the floor during the conferences, and if they did so with a cooperative or polemical approach.

## **2. The 'state of the art': composition of delegations to inter-parliamentary conferences and the presence of opposition parties**

Scholars have detected at least three possible kinds of 'added value' delivered by the involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs and by their engagement in inter-parliamentary cooperation. First, they indicate an increase in the level of dissemination of information about the EU and a greater awareness of the national public opinions (Griglio & Lupo, 2018; Heffler et al., 2015). Second, they refer to a more effective supervision and accountability of the fragmented EU executive (Griglio & Lupo, 2018). Third, they point to the participation of opposition parties in EU decision-making (Bellamy & Kröger, 2014; Kröger & Bellamy, 2016; Karlsson & Persson, 2022). The latter one is decisive for all these three forms of 'added value', although it is directly visible only in relation to the third. Opposition parties could also have more information on IPCs in which they participate, even if in a way that conflicts with or opposes the results achieved. This, in turn, gives rise to an improved process of democratic deliberation in the domestic parliamentary arena.

The hypothesis behind the empirical research conducted here is that the presence and participation of opposition parties in IPCs can increase the representative capacity of inter-parliamentary cooperation and of the Euro-national parliamentary system (Lupo & Manzella, 2014<sup>2</sup>). Indeed, given that most Member States have parliamentary forms of government, only the Executives, and thus their parliamentary majorities, are represented within the EU intergovernmental institutions, such as the European Council and the Council.

If the delegations to inter-parliamentary conferences were composed exclusively of members of the majority parties, inter-parliamentary cooperation would have been able to fulfil, at best, the function of an exchange of best practices, but it would not deliver much more in democratic terms. Indeed, 'a parliament is not a homogeneous bloc, but a *lieu* of political antagonism where big or small majorities have the last say on formulating parliamentary positions' (Chatzistavrou & Papanikolaou, 2020, p. 178). That is why the involvement in inter-parliamentary cooperation of

opposition parties (including those with Eurosceptic views) a factor potentially capable of changing the face and functions of inter-parliamentary relationships themselves.

Some recent studies have focused on the activity of the two new IPCs and the Europol joint parliamentary scrutiny group (Fromage, 2018), or have considered the behaviour of 'anti-elitist' parties in national parliaments (Otjes & Louwse, 2021). Others have analysed the effective performance of IPCs as arenas for strengthening accountability, especially in the context of domestic interactions between parliaments and executives (Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2021). However, the political side of inter-parliamentary relationships, which is also intimately linked to national forms of government and party politics 'in between' the domestic and the supranational levels, has thus far been largely overlooked (for an exception to this rule, see Brack & Deruelle, 2016 and Miklin, 2013). Against this background, the article aims to analyse the behaviour of national opposition parties in the context of inter-parliamentary cooperation. The objective is to assess the democratic representativeness of IPCs and the kind of contribution which opposition parties have made to inter-parliamentary activities.

### **3. The case study: the inter-parliamentary conference on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU and the selection of national parliaments' delegations**

Without a doubt, the economic and financial crisis has not only given rise to turmoil in the national party systems, but also has changed the role of parliaments in European economic governance and consequently also in inter-parliamentary cooperation (Crum, 2018; Lupo & Griglio, 2018). The crisis, and the consequent use of unpopular austerity measures, prompted significant disputes within the EU about the need to establish additional mechanisms of legitimacy leveraging the procedures through which decisions are made. Such procedures, which have recently been traced back to the third form of legitimacy, are defined as 'throughput legitimacy' (Schmidt, 2012). It was decided, within the framework of the TSCG, to strengthen the democratic accountability of the EU's new procedures, making full use of the resources of parliamentary representation, in the EP as well as in the national parliaments (Habermas, 2012; Nicolaïdis, 2013; Bellamy, 2013; national parliaments, however, have reacted in different ways to the crisis: see Auel & Höing, 2014).

Article 13 of the TSCG thus established that parliaments, under the provisions of Protocol no. 1 on the role of the national parliaments annexed to the TEU, together with the EP, define the organisation and promotion of a conference of representatives of the respective committees responsible for matters of the EP and of the national parliaments for the discussion of

budgetary and other policies falling within the scope of the Treaty itself (Fromage, 2016). As a result, the inter-parliamentary conference on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU includes representatives of the EP and of the national parliaments of all the Member States of the EU and not only of those signatories of the TSCG or those of the Eurozone (Esposito, 2014).

The composition of each national delegation to this conference is generally undefined, since each parliament may determine the size of its own delegation (Esposito, 2014). This decision was aimed at avoiding the discussions that took place some months prior regarding the IPC on Common Foreign and Security Policy (Herranz-Surrallés, 2014).

### 3.1. Selection of national delegations

To analyse the participation of opposition parties in the meetings of the conference, a choice had to be made regarding which national delegations to consider in this study, on top of the EP delegations. The parliamentary delegations selected are those of nine Member states: Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Portugal and Sweden.

This selection of countries is representative of both founding and more recent Member States; but also large, medium and small countries; Eurozone and non-Eurozone Member States; and northern and southern European countries. Indeed, the financial crisis has also given rise to some asymmetries between the parliaments of creditor and debtor states. We intend to also consider the role of Eurosceptic parties, especially in those States where they are in opposition (De Vries, 2018). In Poland and Italy, for example, we attempt to verify if and how the participation of MPs changed before and after 2015 and 2018 respectively (when the Eurosceptic parties moved from the opposition to the government).

Within the conference, the role of opposition (and Eurosceptic) parties is expected to be of fundamental importance, because fiscal issues are central to the political programmes of many of these parties. Following the economic, financial and public debt crisis, many opposition parties have taken advantage of economic and financial issues to strongly criticise the government majorities but also the EU and the Economic and Monetary Union (cf. Fromage & van den Brink, 2020). Just as the EU has been used by government and majority parties to release themselves from responsibility for certain choices, in the same way, it is easy for opposition parties to attack the government and parliamentary majority on their EU policy and European issues more broadly. *A fortiori*, economic and financial issues have not only been a matter of strategic importance to the political dynamics, but the opposition parties have also been able to unload all their Euroscepticism in relation to these issues.

#### 4. The representativeness of the delegations to inter-parliamentary conferences on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU: the position of opposition parties

This first part of the empirical analysis looks at the composition of the parliamentary delegations of the nine selected countries to the conference on stability, coordination and governance in the Economic and Monetary Union, and inclusion of representatives from opposition parties in the selected cases.

It was possible to find the lists of participants to all the meetings of this IPC, except for those that took place in Nicosia in 2013, in Brussels in 2014, and in Luxembourg in 2015. Those lists were available (in a few cases in draft version) online. They very often included the party affiliation of the participants. When the latter information was not available, the party affiliation has been derived from the names of the MPs.

In our database, in order to classify which parties were in the majority and which were in opposition within the national forms of government at the time of the various conferences, we referred to the platform ParlGov.<sup>3</sup>

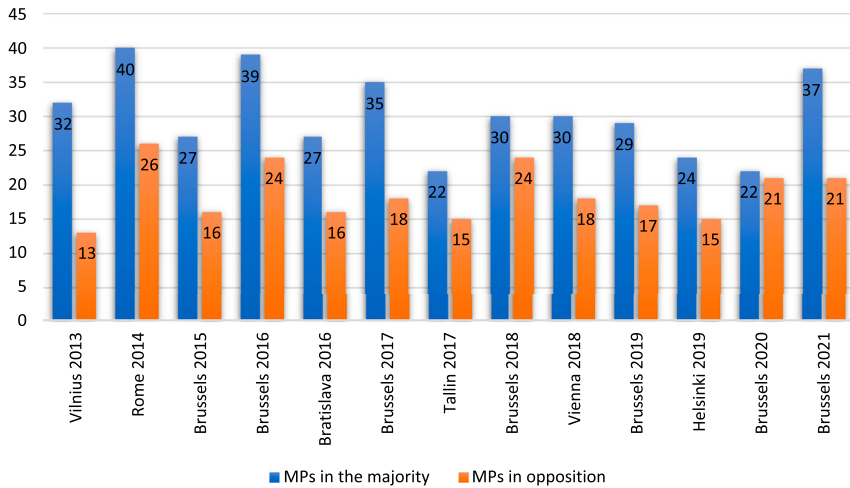
Two types of information have been considered: the composition of delegations to the IPC meetings (name of the delegates and party affiliation); and the composition of national parliaments and cabinets. For all delegations, the effective attendance at 12 meetings of the IPC has been considered.

The analysis shows, first of all, that parliamentary delegations of the various Member States are very different in terms of their size and composition: this reflects the diverse structure and size of national parliaments. Second, it emerges that, overall, national opposition parties are often represented to a good extent. Overall, considering all the delegations examined at the 12 conference meetings, out of 580 MPs, 223 are from opposition parties: approximately 38.44% of the total.

The averages were calculated by taking the total number of members of each national delegation at all IPC meetings and then, by averaging those who were MPs of the majority parties and those who were opposition MPs participating in the 12 meetings examined. In this way, it is possible to verify if the participation of the opposition parties is robust or sporadic.

It seems sensible to keep separate the analyses of the pre and post covid conferences. The latter, in fact, were held online and, therefore, participation could have been easier and, in any case, is different from the previous ones.

Figure 1 shows, for each conference, how many members of the majority parties and how many of the opposition parties took part. Instead, table 1 shows, for each national delegation, the average of the MPs of majority and opposition participating to the conferences.



**Figure 1.** Overall number of MPs of the 9 national delegations analysed, divided by majority and opposition, attending the conferences. Source: Website of inter-parliamentary conferences on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU at ipex.eu.

At the level of individual delegations, the results are even more interesting.

As can be seen from table no. 1, some delegations are more numerous than others: this is the case of the German and the Portuguese ones which amount – on average – to 7.25 and 6.75 MPs respectively. Another interesting observation is that in the Spanish, Danish, Portuguese and Swedish cases the number of representatives from the opposition: it was – on average – higher than that from ruling majority parties. Going into more detail, the Danish Parliament, within a non-Eurozone country, hardly participates in the conference and, when the delegation did participate, it represented the opposition better than the majority.

On average, 4 Spanish parliamentarians participated in the conference's meetings, a number similar to the Italian delegations, but smaller than the

**Table 1.** Quantitative analysis of the delegations (except the 2021 virtual conference).

Delegations	MPs sent to conference meetings on average	MPs of the opposition parties sent to conference meetings on average
German	7.25	2.5
Italian	4.36 (excluding the Rome conference)	1.8 (excluding the Rome conference)
Spanish	3.9	2.5
French	7.9	2.1
Danish	1.08	0.6
Dutch	4.1	1.6
Polish	5.3	1.5
Portuguese	6.75	3.6
Swedish	2.6	1.75



French and German delegations. Within the Spanish delegations, on average there were 2.3 parliamentarians of the opposition parties. Therefore, the Spanish delegations were unbalanced in favour of the opposition. This can probably be traced back to the phase of unprecedented governmental instability Spain has confronted over the last few years and to the formation of minority governments. A parallel can be drawn with the Danish parliament: as can be seen from the data in [table 1](#), the Spanish parliament sent few representatives to the conferences and, in some of them (Brussels 2016, 2018; Vienna 2018; Brussels 2019, 2020) the opposition was better represented than the majority.

Portugal sent a good number of parliamentarians to these conferences: an average of 6.75 MPs. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in 8 out of the 12 meetings of this conference, there were more parliamentarians from opposition parties than those from majority parties. In six of these conferences (the last four and those of 2017), the delegation was regularly composed of 3 parliamentarians of the majority and 4 of the opposition. In the case of the Swedish delegation too, it is interesting to note how often the opposition parliamentarians outnumbered the majority ones: this occurred in half of the conferences.

From the perspective of the political composition of the German delegation, the members of the opposition have grown over time: if they were 3 out of 12 in Vilnius in 2013 and 1 out of 7 in Rome in 2014, they became 3 out of 7 members in Vienna in 2018, even 4 out of 7 members in Brussels in 2018 and 4 out of 8 members in Brussels in 2019 (to then settle at 3 out of 6 members in Helsinki in 2019 and in Brussels in 2020). Of the members of the national oppositions who attended the meetings, those of the Die Linke, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, and AfD parties prevailed.

The French delegations, on closer inspection, are quite heterogeneous over time in terms of their size and composition, but they do not have a large number of opposition members compared to those of the majority, the lowest by comparison with the other founding Member States in the sample, namely Germany and Italy.

The analysis of the Italian delegations demonstrates that Italy, as compared with the German delegations, sends rather small delegations to IPC, generally comprising a couple of parliamentarians for each chamber in a system characterised by symmetrical bicameralism. The average number of parliamentarians attending the conference meetings is, in this case, influenced by the 2014 IPC in Rome, in which 19 deputies and 12 senators took part, within an unusually large delegation of 31 parliamentarians. If we exclude the Rome meeting, however, the average number of parliamentarians in attendance was 4.36 and that of opposition members was 1.18. In general, as can be seen from the data, the Italian parliament's delegation has become smaller over the years. On average, the Polish parliament sends

5.3 parliamentarians to each conference: in particular, between the two chambers, 3.8 majority parliamentarians, and 1.5 parliamentarians from the opposition parties. There are no noticeable changes in the pre- and post-2015 delegations.

Another characteristic that can be investigated is the relationship between the composition of the delegations and bicameralism, which seems interesting at least for the larger countries (and obviously excluding unicameral parliaments, such as the Danish, Portuguese and Swedish ones). While the French National Assembly sends 4.5 parliamentarians on average, 0.5 of whom are from opposition parties, the Senate, sends an average of 3.4 and 1.6 MPs from the opposition and. The data, therefore, shows that the members of the National Assembly are slightly more numerous than those of the Senate which does not entertain a confidence relationship with the government. In the Senate, however, the delegation is often equally composed of majority and opposition parliamentarians; the latter, by contrast, are poorly represented in the National Assembly's delegation. In the Spanish case, there are no appreciable differences between the *Congreso de los diputados* and the *Senado*.

The analysis of the German delegations demonstrates that the German parliament has always been represented by a rather large delegation: the number of delegation members from the Bundestag never falls below 5 in the 12 conferences examined. The same cannot be said of the Bundesrat: while its delegation comprised 3 members at 2 conferences (Vilnius 2013; Brussels 2015), it often did not send any representatives at all to the conferences considered. Overall, an average of 8.5 MPs attended from the *Bundestag*, while an average of 1.08 MPs was present for the *Bundesrat*.

The Italian Chamber of Deputies sent an average of 3.41 deputies, while the Senate of the Republic an average of 3.25. The Italian delegations of the two chambers were of almost the same size, but this is probably due to the symmetrical bicameralism already noted, in which both Chambers can confer or withdraw their confidence in the government, and the Senate's very active participation in EU affairs (furthermore, there may also be a question of budget and personnel: smaller committees? Parties? probably encounter greater difficulties in sending large delegations).

It seems important, at this point, to analyse the composition of delegations in one conference that has taken place after the start of the pandemic. As mentioned at the beginning, this is the first conference meeting which has been held virtually, as part of the European Parliamentary Week in February 2021, jointly organised by the European Parliament and the Portuguese Assembleia da República.

Table 2 contains a quantitative analysis of the national delegations to the 2021 virtual conference.

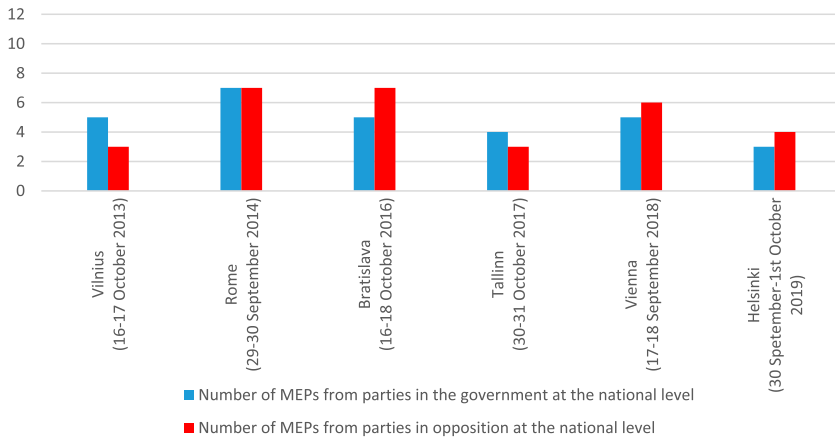
**Table 2.** Quantitative analysis of the delegations at the 2021 virtual conference.

Delegations	MP	Majority	Opposition
German	10	5	5
Italian	7	6	1
Spain	6	3	3
French	4	3	1
Danish	0	0	0
Dutch	2	1	1
Polish	7	5	2
Portuguese	17	11	6
Swedish	5	3	2

We only point out that Italy has a very low representation of opposition parties (only one member), since a few days before the meeting, Mario Draghi's large coalition government (which comprised only one opposition party) was formed. Furthermore, in addition to the absence of the Danish MPs, the number of those from Portugal stands out (probably due to the fact that the Portuguese Parliament was co-organiser of the meeting). For the rest, the results of the analysis of this meeting are conflicting, first of all in relation to the total number of MPs in the various delegations. In fact, although some are more numerous than in the previous meetings (see Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, Sweden), others are smaller (France, Denmark, Netherlands). The total number of majority (37) and opposition members (21) is comparable to that of the previous meetings, so no particular differences stand out in this regard.

Finally, it is important to analyse the EP delegations at the same IPC. We considered the national party of EP delegates and checked for each conference meeting whether that party was in the majority or in the opposition at the domestic level. We used this method of analysis in light of the highly variable majorities in the EP and of the fact that the European Commission is usually invested with a large majority, which is then almost never replicated in subsequent deliberations (the MEPs, of course, represent European citizens, but it is undeniable, at the same time, that there are links between European and national political parties). It should be noted, however, that – with respect to the IPC generally taking place in February in Brussels – while the list of participants from national parliaments is available online, the composition of the participating EP delegations is not reported. Therefore, we considered only the EP delegations attending the conferences in Vilnius, Rome, Bratislava, Tallinn, Vienna and Helsinki.

In general, the average number of parliamentarians from the EP delegation is 8.6.<sup>4</sup> Just as we noted for the national parliamentary delegations of the various Member States, the delegations of the EP have also varied significantly with respect to their size and composition. Yet, by contrast with the national parliamentary delegations, this does not seem to particularly reflect



**Figure 2.** Number of MEPs attending the conferences sorted by whether their party was in the government or opposition at the national level at the time. Source: Website of inter-parliamentary conferences on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU at [ipex.eu](http://ipex.eu).

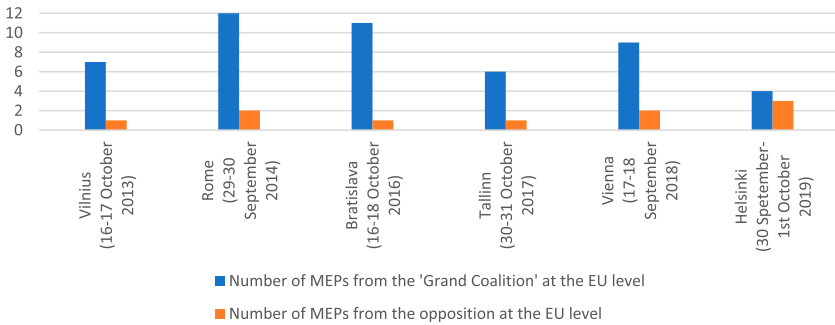
the composition of the EP. A notable exception concerns the last two conference meetings, where the national oppositions at the EU level were better represented, possibly accounting for the more diverse composition of the EP and the decreasing influence of the Grand Coalition (EEP + S&D + ALDE) in recent years.

Turning to the issue of how national majorities and oppositions are represented in the delegations, we coded the position of the parties in the national arena at the time of each meeting. The results show that national opposition parties are very well represented in EP delegations, often surpassing the representation of parties supporting the national government. This is not particularly surprising: EP ‘second-order’ elections are often described as sanctions against or signals to national governments (Kritzinger, & al, 2020; Manow & Döring, 2008).

In figures 2 and 3 we can see, respectively, the number of MEPs attending the conferences sorted by whether their party was in the government or opposition at the national level at the time and the number of MEPs attending the conferences sorted by whether their EP group was part of the Grand Coalition (+ ALDE) at the EU level.

## 5. Inter-parliamentary cooperation through the behaviour of parliamentary delegations’ members

To account for the practical dimension of the conference’s representativeness, we attempt to shed light on the practice of IPCs from the political



**Figure 3.** Number of MEPs attending the conferences sorted by whether their EP group was part of the Grand Coalition (+ALDE) at the EU level. Source: Website of inter-parliamentary conferences at ipex.eu.

dynamic's perspective. In fact, the mere inclusion of opposition parties in inter-parliamentary delegations might not mean much if these delegates are unable to make a difference. It therefore seems useful to empirically explore the concrete involvement and attitudes of parliamentarians (in particular, opposition parties' representatives) in the IPCs during such meetings. Here, we have assessed the behaviour of national MPs at four meetings of the conference.

At the Rome conference of September 2014, in the first two sessions, many Italian MPs from opposition parties took the floor. It should be recalled that the Italian delegation, at that meeting, was particularly numerous. An MP of the M5S displayed a mixed attitude: cooperative but polemical towards EU at the same time. Two Forza Italia MPs had a cooperative attitude, while a member of the Lega made a polemical intervention, attacking the TSCG and the rules of European economic governance. In the second session, German Green MPs and a member of the Partij van de Arbeid spoke about the Banking Union. A Polish majority MP defended Polish actions. Another member of the M5S took the floor for Italy, making a cooperative intervention towards EU. Then, an MP from the same party criticised the EU's economic and financial constraints. In addition, a member of the Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà intervened, lashing out against the Six pack and its consequences. Finally, a member of the Lega made a critical speech regarding the single market and its problems. The members of the Portuguese delegation spoke several times: in particular, members of the majority on three occasions, and members of opposition parties twice. Although one of these speeches was, in many ways, critical of the Union, it cannot be viewed as Eurosceptic, nor did it use the IPC as a platform to criticise its own government.

The second conference meeting analysed here was held in September 2018 in Vienna. In the first session, an MP (FDP) for Germany, an MP from the Partido Popular from Spain, and several Portuguese MPs intervened. The most hostile intervention was made by MPs of the PCP (Portuguese Communist Party).<sup>5</sup>

As regards the third conference held in Brussels on February 2020, as part of the European Parliamentary Week, only three opposition MPs spoke in the meeting: one Italian MP (Lega) and two Spanish parliamentarians (one from the People's Party and one from Vox). The first intervention was particularly interesting. A member of an opposition party (Lega) took the opportunity to raise a political controversy regarding his national government and to ask the (Italian) European Commissioner Gentiloni for clarification as to how much his government had said at the national level regarding the state of negotiations on the ESM (and Commissioner Gentiloni replied). An intervention that seems consistent with the observation according to which Eurosceptic MPs have something to gain from critically discussing and communicating EU policies, especially when they are not appreciated by their national voters.

The fourth IPC meeting we analyse was held at the EP during the 2021 European Parliamentary Week, at the height of the pandemic, and was conducted in an online mode.<sup>6</sup> Discussions were dominated by the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on EU economies and their recovery. In the opening plenary session, no members of the opposition parties of the national delegations took the floor. This seems particularly significant: with the online mode, it would have been easier even for the 'small' parliaments to be represented by a higher number of members of the opposition and, above all, to have them speak. Instead, the opportunity offered by remote participation was not exploited at all.

It therefore seems useful to consider, in addition to the initial session, one of the thematic sessions too: in particular, the Inter-parliamentary Committee Meeting organised by the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON). Here, a MP from Fratelli d'Italia took the floor for a minute, without raising any particular controversy.

The conducted analysis indicates, in general, that the members of the opposition parties did not take the floor very often despite their consistent representation in the delegations. Also analysing the other delegations to all four conferences, it might be observed that the members of the majority parties were those most engaged in inter-parliamentary debates, while representatives of the opposition tended to remain at the margins. In general, with the exception of the Italian delegation (the largest, given the location of the first conference analysed) and the Portuguese, members of the government majority almost exclusively took the floor within the other seven delegations examined.

In 2018, when the Vienna conference took place, the context was rather different. It suffices to note that in Italy at the time, the M5S-Lega government was initiating the debate on the budget bill, originally without respecting the European rules, which produced a long debate between Italy and EU institutions. It is therefore surprising that no member of these two parties, despite being part of the governmental coalition, took the floor during the conference.

It is therefore not easy to give an account of the political parties' positions taken in the debates at the analysed IPC. Opposition members did not seem to use the Conference as an opportunity to criticise the national government publicly and internationally. In fact, the talks at the four conferences have always been held on a very general level, without ever analysing or even challenging the positions of national governments.

From this analysis it can be concluded that members of national opposition parties tend to use self-restraint in the IP conference on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU, leaving the floor to representatives of the majority parties. This might indicate that, at these kinds of inter-parliamentary conferences, the objectives of the national delegations and of national interests prevail more than that of party cleavages. In fact, even when opposition MPs speak up, they rarely use this forum 'against' their own government, instead, more often than not, exhibiting a moderate approach.

## 6. Conclusion

Our initial hypothesis was that there was a positive relationship between the participation of opposition parties and representativeness of inter-parliamentary conferences. We expected the active engagement of the opposition parties in IPC to represent an added value to the broader EU decision-making process in terms of democratic deliberation and accountability.

Our analysis of the composition of parliamentary delegations to the inter-parliamentary conference on stability, economic coordination and governance in the EU has shown that the participation of members of national oppositions has been correctly ensured by all parliaments considered here (including the EP). Therefore, it appears that the representativeness of parliamentary delegations and, consequently of the analysed IPC, is guaranteed.

However, the qualitative analysis of the actual interventions of opposition parties in the IPC meetings is far less encouraging. The ability of the conference to channel national oppositions' points of view, to foster an inclusive process of deliberation (even if not binding) and to echo the domestic discontent of the governments' positions on EU affairs is ultimately impaired by the very limited participation of opposition members in the debate. They hardly take the floor and engage in inter-parliamentary discussion.

The first virtual meeting ever, in 2021, did not reflect any change in this respect. One positive aspect of the virtual conference can, however, be identified: on this occasion, a formal space was reserved for political group meetings. This is a positive factor since, as has also been noted elsewhere, ‘preparatory meetings could happen within political families, to increase the link between national parties and the European political parties’ (Brack, 2021). This can be useful to create more space ‘for political parties in inter-parliamentary cooperation as a way to politicise these meetings’ and to ensure that ‘MPs and MEPs could sit by political families instead of by national (or European) delegations’ (Brack, 2021).

Finally, it should be noted that the presidency summaries of the IPC still refer to national delegations and not to the positions of European political families or parties (although political groups meetings are sometimes included in the programme). This denotes an attitude leaning more towards the position of a single national parliament as a whole – also because the members of the opposition, as noted, often do not speak –, than towards a variety of positions supported by MPs from different Member States reunited under the same European political family. This surely decreases the level of representativeness and politicisation of IPCs. Furthermore, in the same documents, greater emphasis is given to the initial speeches than to the positions in the debate between parliamentarians. Reading these documents, and sometimes also viewing the general programme of the IPCs, one often has the impression that the meeting resembles more of an academic seminar rather than an inter-parliamentary meeting.

Perhaps the documents issued for and during the meetings of IPCs should instead be drafted taking more into account the different political families of MPs. This, in some ways, could change the function of inter-parliamentary cooperation, making it more representative of European citizens, including those who voted for opposition parties at the national level. This could be an element that could move inter-parliamentary cooperation towards a model in which opposition parties are more incentivized to actively participate in IPCs and in which ‘national delegations should no longer be treated as unitary actors, but as representatives of the diversity of political opinions of a given parliament’ (Brack, 2021).

Active participation of parliamentarians from opposition parties, and in particular Eurosceptic ones, could therefore contribute to making this IPC a genuine ‘window of democracy’ (Pernice, 2013). To fully exploit this potential, the rules of operation of the IPC could try to encourage this type of debate (summarised by the expression ‘interparliamentarism by committee’: Lupo & Fasone, 2016). On the contrary, the conference’s rules of procedure seek to avoid this type of ‘political’ use of conferences.

Moreover, the participation of opposition MPs appears to be consistent with the theory of the Euro-national parliamentary system (Lupo & Manzella, 2014).



One of the benefits of these conferences, in fact, is what results from the participation of both majorities and oppositions, namely the creation of an environment suitable for a moment of almost 'unique' meeting, within the Euro-national parliamentary system, of members of the EP and national parliaments, majority and opposition, pro-EU and also Eurosceptics. In this sense, inter-parliamentary cooperation could constitute a vital dimension of the Euro-national parliamentary system and for this reason, it seems desirable to create incentives and to put the members of the opposition in a position to intervene; in short, to stimulate their active participation.

## Notes

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2. This theorisation aims to highlight how each institution, both those of the European Union and those of each Member State, is called upon to deal with all the others simultaneously. This applies to the Executives, which are "fragmented", but also to the Parliaments, both at the European and at the national levels.
3. ParlGov ([www.parlgov.org](http://www.parlgov.org)) is a data infrastructure for political science which contains information for all EU and most OECD democracies (37 countries). The database combines approximately 1,700 parties, 990 elections (9,300 results), and 1,600 cabinets (3,800 parties).
4. In the analysed period, the number of MEPs has ranged from 751 following the 2014 European elections to 705 after 31 January 2020.
5. He stated that the reaction to the 2014 crisis had led to a disaster, to an economic and social regression and that the 2015 elections had featured a rejection of the infamous measures imposed by the troika. The goal, according to him, is to dissolve the EMU and revoke the TSCG.
6. It was the first remote European Parliamentary Week ever organized.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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