

# The ECSC Common Assembly's decision to create political groups

## Writing a new chapter in transnational parliamentary history

### SUMMARY

Political groups in the European Parliament contribute greatly to the institution's supranational character and are a most important element of its parliamentary work. Moreover, the Parliament's political groups have proven to be crucial designers of EU politics and policies. However, when the forerunner of today's Parliament, the Common Assembly of the Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), was established in 1952, the creation of political groups was not envisaged at all. Making use of its autonomy with regard to writing its rules of procedures, the ECSC Common Assembly unanimously decided, at its plenary session in June 1953, to allow the creation of political groups. With this decision, the ECSC Common Assembly became the world's first international assembly organised in political groups.

This briefing analyses the decision of the ECSC Common Assembly to create political groups by bringing together political and historical science literature on the topic, as well as original sources from the Parliament's Historical Archives that record considerations and motives for the decision to create political groups. It will illustrate the complementary cultural, historical, organisational and financial reasons for this decision. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that, for the first ECSC Common Assembly members, it was highly important to take account of political affiliations in order to highlight the supranational character of the newly emerging Assembly. Finally, the briefing highlights that common work within the political groups was essential in helping to overcome early difficulties between the Assembly's members with different national backgrounds.



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## Political groups in the Parliament: an exceptional case of transnational representation

In May 2019, European elections were held for the ninth time in the history of the European Parliament. In the wake of the elections, the Parliament's political groups have to notify their composition before the opening session of the newly elected Parliament in early July 2019. Following the last European elections, seven political groups were constituted at the Parliament's opening session of the eighth parliamentary term in July 2014.<sup>1</sup>

However, when the forerunner of today's Parliament, the Common Assembly of the Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), was established in 1952, the creation of political groups was not envisaged at all. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1951 by the ECSC's six founding states<sup>2</sup> and laying the ECSC's foundation, did not mention the creation of political groups sharing a same ideology and similar persuasion within the new assembly. Nevertheless, as early as at the first ECSC Common Assembly plenary session in September 1952, it appeared that members would group along political instead of national affiliation. As a consequence, at its plenary session in June 1953, and thus only a couple of months after its inauguration, the Assembly unanimously decided to insert the creation of political groups into its rules of procedure.<sup>3</sup> As a result, three political groups were officially authorised in 1953: the Christian Democratic Group, the Socialist Group, and the Group of Liberals. All three political groups are still represented in today's Parliament, albeit under other names.<sup>4</sup>

With the decision to create political groups, the ECSC Common Assembly became a special case compared to other international assemblies established after World War II. These were organised predominantly along national lines. This was also true for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, founded in 1949, which in many respects functioned as a model for the establishment of the ECSC Common Assembly. Although informal networks of members with the same political orientations existed, there were no official political groups in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. These were created only in 1964.<sup>5</sup> The ECSC Common Assembly thus played a real pioneering role with the creation of political groups in 1953. From a historical perspective, and in comparison to other international institutions at the time, the ECSC Common Assembly's early formation as a system of transnational representation in the form of political groups is thus an exceptional case.

In fact, the ECSC Common Assembly's 1953 decision to create political groups, in addition to various committees, established a transnational parliamentary system that continues today. The Parliament's political groups have proven to be crucial designers of EU politics and policies, and thus of European integration. Against this background, the question of why the ECSC Common Assembly decided to create political groups and how their establishment was approached, is all the more important.

Hitherto, both EU political and historical science research have scarcely dealt with the ECSC Common Assembly's considerations and motives regarding the creation of political groups. In the political science literature there are two further theoretical explanations, one resting on a cultural argument and the other on a historical argument. The first puts forward that the development of the ECSC Common Assembly's structure with political groups was strongly influenced by the realities and practices of parliamentary systems, with which the Assembly's members were familiar from their home countries (cultural argument). The second assumes, with a view to the historical context, that political groups were created as a kind of symbolic stand against nationalism, which was seen as a reason behind World Wars I and II, and to clearly mark the new ECSC Common Assembly as a supranational institution (historical argument).<sup>6</sup> In the historical science literature, organisational considerations and financial issues are mentioned as rationales for the Assembly's members when deciding to create political groups.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this briefing is to analyse the considerations and motives underlying the ECSC Common Assembly decision to create political groups in 1953. In order to allow for a sound answer to

questions as to why the Assembly did so, the briefing brings together not only explanations from the political and historical science literature, it also uses original debates and sources from the Parliament's Historical Archives that record discussions ahead of the decision to create political groups. The briefing will demonstrate that the analysis of these original debates and sources provides historical-empirical evidence for both the cultural and historical theoretical arguments suggested by the political science literature. Furthermore, the briefing will outline how political groups developed after the decision on their creation was taken.

## Cultural and historical reasons for the creation of political groups

Without any specifications in the 1951 Paris Treaty on the creation of political groups within the ECSC Common Assembly, seats were allocated in the new assembly in alphabetical order. As a consequence, some members found themselves sitting beside a neighbour with different political preferences. For example, the Belgian Socialist Fernand Dehousse, with a strong federalist agenda for Europe, sat next to the French Gaullist advocate Michel Debré. Cooperation and coordination between members sharing political ideologies was therefore rather cumbersome.<sup>8</sup>

To compensate for this weakness, informal contacts and networks developed quickly and organically between members from different countries who belonged to parties of the same political persuasion.<sup>9</sup> The importance of these informal contacts and networks, with political connotations for the ECSC Common Assembly's decision-making processes, were already apparent when on the second day of the first plenary session in September 1952, the members had to elect

the first president of the assembly. As historian Jacob Krumrey has described it, the Belgian Socialist Paul-Henri Spaak was a surprise candidate in comparison to the candidacy of two Christian Democrats, François de Menthon of France and Heinrich von Brentano of Germany. With France's Jean Monnet already in place as President of the ECSC High Authority, and the Italian Massimo Pilotti sitting as President of the Court of Justice, von Brentano, coming from another big Member State, Germany, was considered the front-runner for the presidency of the Common Assembly. Against



Paul-Henri Spaak speaking to the hemicycle of the ECSC Common Assembly

all odds, however, Spaak won the election, as he could muster the votes of all the French-speaking members from Belgium, France, and Luxembourg, and all of the socialist members, including the German social democrats.<sup>10</sup> Arising at the first ECSC Common Assembly presidential election, this incident contributed greatly to triggering a debate as to whether political groups should be created.

As early as the second plenary session, in January 1953, the ideological division within the assembly was recognised openly for the very first time. In this plenary session, a debate took place on the Assembly's rules of procedure and on whether the appointment of members to committees should attempt to be representative of both the Member States and the various political traditions. A wide-reaching mutual understanding of the issue emerged from that session, exemplifying the members' view of the Assembly's political nature and the role of political groups within it. As one of the first

with an opportunity to speak in the debate, the German Liberal, Victor-Emmanuel Preusker, emphasised that the question of the nationality of individual members should not play a role in the Assembly's future.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the Italian Socialist, Giovanni Persico, underlined that if the aim of unifying Europe was real, it would be absurd to mention a national division in the Assembly's rules of procedures.<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, Belgian Christian Democrat, Paul Struye, underlined the paradox of the Assembly introducing a first provision making national delegations the lead decision-making entity (as is the case in the Council of Europe), especially as the ECSC Common Assembly would be an assembly with a much greater supranational spirit than the Council of Europe.<sup>13</sup> With a view to the political groups to be established, Belgian Socialist, Pierre-François Vermeulen, pointed out that it should be simply natural that political groups would become more important than national delegations.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the members' opposition to nationalism was crucial for the creation of political groups. They considered political groups to provide a way to overcome national representation, to push towards transnational representation, and to develop the ECSC Common Assembly as a real supranational institution. The ECSC Common Assembly's debate in January 1953 therefore provides historical-empirical evidence for the historical thesis regarding the creation of political groups.

According to EU political scientist and historian Jürgen Mittag, the ECSC Common Assembly's autonomy with regard to its rules of procedure was of special importance for the development of political groups. This autonomy allowed the Assembly to decide on its internal issues without the consent of the Council of Ministers, as long as no primary law was concerned. As the ECSC Paris Treaty did not include any provisions on political groups, it was for the ECSC Common Assembly with its autonomous rules of procedure to decide and make arrangements for the creation of political groups.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the ECSC Common Assembly made full use of the contractual gap on political groups and exploited the Paris Treaty in its own interests, and with a view to finding and consolidating its role within the new European institutional system. The Rules' Committee of the time was commissioned to look into the issue of amending the first draft of the Assembly's rules of procedure, which did not mention political groups and their organisation.

The Rules' Committee carried out this commission by preparing an analysis on provisions for the constitution of political groups in national parliaments of several Member States. This analysis was finalised at the beginning of March 1953, and served from then on as a guideline for consideration



Paul Struye

of the ECSC Common Assembly's provisions for creating political groups.<sup>16</sup> It compiled the relevant provisions from the German *Bundestag*, the Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, the French *Assemblée Nationale* and the French *Conseil de la République* (of the Fourth French Republic). On that basis, the analysis in particular provided information on the calculation of the minimum number of members necessary to constitute a political group. It stated that, in the respective parliaments, the minimum number of political group members was calculated according to the following principle: The total amount of assembly members divided by the amount of committee members gives the minimum amount of political group members. In this manner, it would be guaranteed that at least one member of each

political group could participate in the committees' work and meetings. This national parliament principle was adopted in the later report by the Belgian member, Paul Struye, for the introduction of provisions on the creation of political groups in the ECSC Common Assembly's rules of procedures. Struye's report outlined that the Rules Committee agreed that a minimum size of nine political group members would allow every political group to appoint a representative for each of the Assembly's committees (the Assembly established seven committees in early 1953).<sup>17</sup> The Rules

Committee's analysis and Struye's report thus show that when the Common Assembly's members were faced with organising themselves in the new European-level assembly they naturally decided to look to the national parliaments' structures with which they were familiar. There is therefore also historical-empirical evidence for the cultural argument regarding the creation of political groups.

## Organisational and financial reasons for the creation of political groups

In addition to these historical and cultural reasons, organisational considerations and financial issues have also driven the decision to create political groups, as argued in the historical science literature. As the historian Sandro Guerrieri has showed, the objective of finding a parliamentary structure that would facilitate the Assembly's task of monitoring the work of the ECSC's executive, the High Authority, was at the heart of organisational considerations.<sup>18</sup> Original historical sources support this argument. For example, minutes from the Assembly's plenary session in June 1953 illustrate that various members highlighted that political groups would make the Assembly's work more efficient. For instance, the Dutch Christian Democrat, Emmanuel Sassen, said that political groups would ensure a more effective parliamentary, democratic and political control.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the German Socialist, Herbert Wehner, stated that political groups would help to bring the ECSC Common Assembly to political life and to provide it with information crucial for its parliamentary work.<sup>20</sup>

Closely linked to organisational considerations as to how to optimise the Assembly's structure and the parliamentary work of political groups, was the issue of their financing. In the plenary debate of March 1953, on budgetary proposals for the ECSC Common Assembly's financial year 1953/1954, budget allocations for political groups (potentially to be established) were addressed.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on the proper functioning of the Assembly, the Belgian Socialist, Pierre-François Vermeylen, put it succinctly that this would only be possible if political groups were created in an adequate form and equipped with required resources (such as financial funds) for their activities.<sup>22</sup> This applied in particular to establishing political group secretariats and the holding of political group meetings when there were no plenary sessions. However, the financing of political groups was not uncontroversial. Discussion concerned, inter alia, the amounts that should be allocated to political groups. After a lengthy debate, an agreement was reached to include a budget item of BEF5 million<sup>23</sup> for the (potential) political groups in the budgetary proposal.<sup>24</sup>

Against the background of these various complementary grounds, the ECSC Common Assembly unanimously decided to pass a resolution allowing the official constitutionalisation of political groups at its plenary session in June 1953.

## Political groups in the making

According to the resolution, all that was required to form a political group was a declaration of formation, including the name of the group, its executive and the signatures of its members. The only restrictions were: first, that groups be politically, not nationally, based; second, that they have at least nine members; and third, that no individual could belong to more than one group.<sup>25</sup> The Assembly's Rules Committee had considered it pointless to hamper the creation of political groups with overly-strict formalities and conditions.<sup>26</sup> The decision to create political groups was formalised with the introduction of paragraph 33 bis in the ECSC Common Assembly's rules of procedure.

With their official authorisation in 1953, the first three political groups (the Christian Democratic Group, the Socialist Group, and the Liberal Group) began to develop organisational structures. At first, the groups' structures were rather small, consisting essentially of a bureau – with a chair, a vice-chair, a treasurer, a secretary-general – and a handful of administrative staff. Likewise, the political groups' budgets were quite limited in the beginning. For the 1953/1954 parliamentary year, for example, the Christian Democratic Group received BEF860 000, the Socialist Group BEF710 000, and the Liberal Group BEF610 000 from the Assembly's budget.<sup>27</sup> With a total amount of BEF2 180 000

of Assembly expenditure for the political groups in the financial year 1953/1954, the total amount remained far below the BEF5 million agreed in the Assembly's budget proposal.

In the following years, the members' work within the political groups was gradually strengthened. The political group bureaus extended their administrative structures, internally resembling the structures of political groups in national parliaments. Following the signature of the 1957 Rome Treaties, the Bureau of the new European Parliamentary Assembly decided that members belonging to the same political group should sit together in plenary.<sup>28</sup> This helped to facilitate the political groups' parliamentary work further, but also to highlight the political nature of the Assembly as a supranational institution. Nevertheless, the political groups' structures remained relatively small until the 1970s.

Fostering transnational cooperation at European level became a more serious prospect for Parliament's political groups during the 1970s. The decision taken at the European Community (EC) summit in The Hague in December 1969, in favour of direct European Parliament elections, provided a new impetus to extend and strengthen their organisational structures. In an influential article published in 1978, the British political scientist David Marquand anticipated a much greater role for political parties and Parliamentary political groups in view of the increased politicisation of EC politics in the wake of the first direct elections to the European Parliament scheduled for June 1979.<sup>29</sup> Parliament's political groups reacted to this decision by setting up more working units dedicated to specific policy areas.

In addition, the number of members per political group constantly increased over time, due to various rounds of Community enlargement. Likewise, the number of staff employed by the political groups has grown constantly. While consisting of only a handful of staff in the 1950s, all political groups together employed 1 103 temporary staff members in 2018. As political groups grew and political groups' staff level increased, the European Parliament's expenditure for political groups also increased. In 2017, for example, Parliament gave a total of €60 000 000 to the political groups. Finally, the number of political groups itself has risen. Starting with three political groups in 1953, the largest number of political groups ever to be simultaneously represented in the European Parliament was at the beginning of the 1989-1994 parliamentary term, with ten political groups. At the end of the 2014-2019 parliamentary term, there were eight political groups.<sup>30</sup>

## Ideological affinities over national borders

As analysis of the ECSC Common Assembly's historical debates and sources related to the decision to formally authorise the creation of political groups shows, since the foundation of the Assembly it was clear for the members of the day that the Assembly's work should not rest on national aspects. Even though it seemed inappropriate to neglect national aspects with regard to the composition of the Assembly's committees and bureau, for the early members it was much more important to take account of political affiliations, to highlight the supranational character of the Assembly. It was therefore only natural that just a couple of months after the constituent plenary session in September 1952, the first suggestions regarding the creation of political groups were put forward. These suggestions were implemented when the ECSC Common Assembly decided to include provisions allowing for the creation of political groups in its rules of procedure, in June 1953. For the development of today's European Parliament, this decision was ground-breaking. To this day, the political groups contribute greatly to the European Parliament's supranational character and underpin a most important element of its parliamentary work.

Swiftly following their authorisation in 1953, the three political groups of the time proved that their preparatory work helped make the ECSC Common Assembly's work more efficient and shorten the length of committee meetings and plenary sessions. For example, within the political groups important proposals and positions were developed. Furthermore, the political groups reached significant compromises, which helped to smooth the Assembly's working procedures. In a report on the role and functioning of the political group by the Sub-Committee for Institutional Questions

in July 1955, the rapporteur, the Luxembourgish Socialist, Jean Fohrmann, recorded that the political groups very often agreed to instruct one or two members to speak in debates on behalf of the political group. Other political group members had the opportunity to present their views and opinions within the political groups' meetings and thus forego speaking in committee meetings or plenary sessions.<sup>31</sup> This practice simplified parliamentary work, which would have not been possible if the Assembly's members had acted only individually or as national representatives.

Finally, the existence of the political groups reduced the initially persistent relevance of national affiliations. In other words, the common work within the political groups was essential in helping to overcome early difficulties between parliamentarians with different national backgrounds. In their book on EU political parties and political groups, political scientists Simon Hix and Christopher Lord showed, by using data mainly from 1979 onwards, that Parliament members coalesce in political groups much more than in national delegations. Historical debates and sources from the Archives of the European Parliament demonstrate that this has clearly been the case from the very early days of today's Parliament; from the 1950s beginnings of its predecessor, the ECSC Common Assembly.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Group of the European People's Party (EPP), Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), European Conservative and Reformists (ECR), Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), and European of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD).
- <sup>2</sup> Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.
- <sup>3</sup> Verhandlungen der Gemeinsamen Versammlung, Ausführliche Sitzungsberichte, Nr. 4, Ordentliche Sitzungsperiode 1953 Zweiter Teil, 15. Bis 23. Juni 1953, in: *Amtsblatt der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für Kohle und Stahl*, pp. 48, 49.
- <sup>4</sup> Christian Democratic Group today: EPP, Socialist Group today: S&D, Group of Liberals today: ALDE.
- <sup>5</sup> Klaus Brunner, *Der Europarat. Eine Einführung*, Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, p. 96.
- <sup>6</sup> On both theoretical assumptions see especially Amie Kreppel, *The European Parliament and Supranational Party System. A Study in Institutional Development*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 185-187.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Sandro Guerrieri, The start of European integration and the parliamentary dimension: the Common Assembly of the ECSC (1952-1958), in: *Parliaments, Estates & Representation*, 28 (2010), pp. 183-193; Jürgen Mittag, Die Politisierung der Gemeinsamen Versammlung der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für Kohle und Stahl: Anfänge transnationaler Fraktionsbildung im Europäischen Parlament, in: *Journal of European Integration History*, 17 (2001), pp. 13-30.
- <sup>8</sup> See Sandro Guerrieri, The Genesis of Supranational Representation. The Formation of Political Groups at the Common Assembly of the ECSC, 1952-1958, in: Lucia Bonfreschi, Giovanni Orsina and Antonio Varsori (eds), *European Parties and the European Integration Process, 1945-1992*, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, pp. 393-410, here p. 394.
- <sup>9</sup> See Guy van Oudenhove, *The Political Parties in the European Parliament. The First Ten Years (September 1952 – September 1962)*, Leyden: A.W. Sijthoff, p. 19.
- <sup>10</sup> Jacob Krümrey, *The Symbolic Politics of European Integration. Staging Europe*, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, p. 118.
- <sup>11</sup> Verhandlungen der Gemeinsamen Versammlung, Ausführliche Sitzungsberichte, Nr. 1, Januartagung 1953, 10. Januar 1953, in: *Amtsblatt der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für Kohle und Stahl*, p. 152.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- <sup>15</sup> Mittag, Die Politisierung der Gemeinsamen Versammlung der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für Kohle und Stahl, p. 18.
- <sup>16</sup> Commission du Règlement de l'Assemblée Commune, des Pétitions et des Immunités, Relevé des articles des Règlements des Parlements nationaux se rapportant à la constitution des Groupes et fractionnés politiques, 9 March 1963, AC 73, Historical Archives of the European Parliament (HAEP).
- <sup>17</sup> Bericht im Namen des Ausschusses für die Geschäftsordnung der Gemeinsamen Versammlung, für Petitionen und Immunitäten über die Einfügung einer Bestimmung hinsichtlich der Bildung von Fraktionen in die Geschäftsordnung von Herrn Paul Struye, Berichterstatter, n.d., AC 226, HAEP.
- <sup>18</sup> Guerrieri, The start of European integration and the parliamentary dimension, p. 188.
- <sup>19</sup> Verhandlungen der Gemeinsamen Versammlung, Ausführliche Sitzungsberichte, Nr. 4, Ordentliche Sitzungsperiode 1953, Zweiter Teil (15. bis 23. Juni 1953, in: *Amtsblatt der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für Kohle und Stahl*, p. 73.

- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 74.
- <sup>21</sup> Verhandlungen der Gemeinsamen Versammlung, Ausführliche Sitzungsberichte, Nr. 2, Außerordentliche Märztagung (11. März 1953), in: *Amtsblatt der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für Kohle und Stahl*, pp. 4-17.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>23</sup> Belgian Francs, BEF.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 15. For more details on the budgetary funds for political groups, see Mittag, Die Politisierung der Gemeinsamen Versammlung der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für Kohle und Stahl, p. 23-25.
- <sup>25</sup> Verhandlungen der Gemeinsamen Versammlung, Ausführliche Sitzungsberichte, Nr. 4, Ordentliche Sitzungsperiode 1953 Zweiter Teil, 15. bis 23. Juni 1953, p. 49.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 48.
- <sup>27</sup> BEF860 000 in September 1953 is equivalent to €16 292 today. In September 1953, €16 292 would have been worth the equivalent of €239 883. BEF710 000 in September 1953 is equivalent to €13 450 today. The equivalent of €13 450 in September 1953 is €198 043 in September 2018. BEF610 000 in September 1953 is equivalent to €11 556 today. The equivalent of €11 556 in September 1953 was €170 149 in September 2018.
- <sup>28</sup> Assemblée Parlementaire Européenne. Bureau. Procès-Verbal de la Réunion du 13 Mai 1958. Strasbourg, APE/BUR/PV/58-3, HAEP.
- <sup>29</sup> David Marquand, Towards a Europe of the Parties? In: *Political Quarterly*, 49 (1978), pp. 425-445.
- <sup>30</sup> For an overview of the Parliament's political groups and their members, budgets and staff posts in the 1979-2019 period, see Christian Salm, [Political Groups in the European Parliament since 1979. Key facts and figures](#), EPRS, June 2019.
- <sup>31</sup> Gemeinsame Versammlung, Arbeitsgruppe Unterausschuss für institutionelle Fragen. Einführende Aufzeichnung zum Bericht über die Rolle und das Funktionieren der Fraktionen der Gemeinsamen Versammlung von Jean Fohrmann, Berichterstatter, Juli 1955, AC 1664, HAEP.

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