



**PhD Program in  
Political Science**

**Ph.D. THESIS**

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**MEPs and their roles**

**Central European politicians in the European Parliament**

Abstract

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**Institute for Political Science**

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## **1. The aim and context of the research**

Until recently, academic research about the European Parliament has neglected those who, uniquely in the institutional framework of the European Union, are elected directly: the Members of the European Parliament. Undoubtedly, the EP went through significant institutional developments since the first direct election of 1979; it evolved from a “fig leaf” into a “co-legislator” (Corbett et al. 2011: 3). In the case of this constantly changing, expanding and increasingly powerful institution, it has been the historic development of the European Parliament which captured academic curiosity. The Europe-wide direct election generated considerable attention from researchers as well, along with the dynamics of party politics, inter-party competition, and party cohesion. Since the European Parliament’s role can only be understood as a part of the European institutional system, the fourth main pillar of scholarship on the EP was made up of analyses of its place within the European Union’s institutional matrix and its interrelationship with other EU bodies (Hix et al. 2002).

The starting point for this dissertation is that no institution can be understood without focusing on the actors who fill the institution with content, and formulate strategies for adaptation to formal and informal rules. From the second half of the 1990s, it was this realization which drove the authors of pioneering research on MEPs (Katz 1997, Scarrow 1997, Norris 1999, Wessels 1999), who have completed significant achievements in exploring topics such as career paths, parliamentary recruitment, and representatives’ perceptions of their own roles. The 21<sup>st</sup> century brought considerable progress in the examination of MEP voting behavior (Hix et al. 2007), intra-EP activity (McElroy 2006, Yordanova 2009), and the relationships between representatives and parliamentary groups (Hix-Noury 2009).

In this dissertation, I referred to those states from the Central European region which acceded to the European Union in 2004 as Central European countries. For the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, it was not only the history of the previous decades – the decades of Socialism and the subsequent democratic transition – which resulted in a similar context for the development of political elites, but also the first decade after the 2004 enlargement of the EU. These ten years make up enough time to assess how the Central European political elite became Europeanized (Semenova et al. 2014) on a new platform - the European Parliament. How have Central European representatives integrated into a supranational political elite (Cotta 1984, Norris 1999, Verzichelli-Edinger 2005) which has

been developing for decades? To what degree have they become participants and shapers of the European system of public policy (Ágh 1998)? What kind of a relationship have they created with their European political groups (Hix-Noury 2009, Hix-Høyland 2013)? And how closely have they followed national politics (Raunio 2000)? In terms of their political role orientations, which factors influence them most (Katz 1997, Farrell-Scully 2003, Navarro 2008), and how do these appear in their activities inside and outside the EP? I examine Central European MEPs in light of these questions.

The appreciation of politicians' understanding of their own role, in terms of its significance from the point of view of political science, was due to the fact that the analysis of politicians' role helped our ability to look beyond formal rules, procedures and institutional positions. It presented us with a picture which recognized the way politicians saw their own work. In political science, the concept of role is strongly linked with the notion of representation. This is because the politician's role consists of the representative's idea of representation and the acts which stem from this. Whom and how do politicians represent? What are the goals which animate them? What factors affect a politician's choice of role? These and similar questions arise over and over again in the 50-year literature on the subject.

Theories of political roles are accompanied by practical benefits as well, since they help expose the relationship between a representative's ideas and actions. They also help increase our forecasting abilities with regards to what behavioral forms can coexist with a specific role. The categorization of roles may also contribute to understanding how politicians adapt to institutional environments and what new incentives or limitations are created for representatives by institutional changes. Perhaps it is the latter which signifies the most important added value of role research. In the end we are allowed a glance into the functioning of the political system through the very people who operate it.

In terms of its genre, this dissertation is a neo-institutionalist elite research. Consequently, it places an emphasis on the effects of institutional frameworks on political behavior, but it also considers individual preferences (career plans, ideological positions, professional experience) as significant factors. For the creation of the role typology used to identify dominant role perceptions, Strøm's theory on politicians' attempt to make the best use of scarce resources (1997) served as a considerable inspiration. Fundamentally, I accept the importance of approaching roles in a strategic manner, but I do not believe that this is enough to serve as the sole explanation for how the roles were formed. The examination of institutional

environments (including the electoral system), career paths, and behavioral habits also follow from Strøm's definition that "parliamentary roles [...] are routines, driven by reasons (preferences), and constrained by rules." These are all considerations which this dissertation treats as fundamentally important, but I also believe that attempts which recognize the necessity to integrate norms and attitudes (Navarro 2008) are also relevant.

This research uses the opinions and attitudes of politicians as a starting point to explore and describe politicians' roles. With this approach, it sticks to mainstream neo-institutional role analysis. Regardless of whether we use politicians' answers to identify role types or to test a specific typology, one thing remains present in both scenarios: politicians' self-perception is paramount. As Blomgren and Rozenberg noted (2012: 215), „we can pretend to talk about parliamentary roles only if MPs' views about being MPs are considered in one way or another". This perspective was vital during the planning of the research on Central European Members of the European Parliament.

## **2. Applied methodology**

In this dissertation, I use several tools and aspects to examine what the appearance of Central European representatives meant for the European Parliament and the effect the EP had on the politicians from new member states as an institutional framework. The various viewpoints point to answer to the main research question of this dissertation: What factors influence the role choices made by Central European MEPs in the European Parliament, and are there characteristic differences between individual roles in activities inside and outside the EP? Based on the literature of neo-institutionalism, I utilized the hypothesis that variables associated with institutional socialization and personal preferences are equally important. For the second half of the question, I used the idea that identifiable differences are present between various role choices in the form of representatives' activities inside and outside the EP (H1) as a starting point. As such, I examine politicians' roles both as dependent and independent variables in answering the central question of this research.

First, it is important to note how Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Slovakian and Slovenian representatives are comparable to and different from other MEPs. Based on the main socio-demographic variables, political experience, and a few of the representatives' main attitudes, I test the hypothesis that Central European MEPs were already similar, based on the

characteristics of their national elites, to EU-15 legislators even after their first 10 years (H2). The backdrop for this statement is provided by the notion that, since the Central European democratic transition, national assemblies have experienced a professionalizing period (Ilonszki 2009). Since the EP elite came mainly from national political elites, this proposition may hold true for MEPs as well.

Parties – European political groups – have a definitive role in structuring the inner operation of the European Parliament. Thus it is impossible to circumvent an examination of the effect Central European representatives had on the cohesion of European political families in their first two complete cycles. By considering changes in the cohesion indexes of EP factions and comparing these to the degree of loyalty exhibited towards the national party, I deliberate on the hypothesis that the appearance of Central European MEPs did not weaken the European Parliament's partisan nature (H3).

Due to the lack of „electoral connection”, a close link to national politics is elemental for MEPs. A member of the European Parliament must pay attention in two directions. With regards to his or her activities inside and outside the institution, a decision to focus legislative activity on either the European or national levels can be of decisive importance. In the absence of party governance, the role of committees is also a known feature in the world of the EP. All MEPs are assigned a role in the committee structure. As a result, questions about how much time and energy a politician should spend on policy questions are present from the very beginning of his or her term. These dilemmas have to be resolved by each of the representatives in order to formulate a political strategy within the EP. Consequently, my hypothesis is that the European/national and policy/politics dimensions lend themselves for a description of politicians' roles (H4). With the help of factor analysis and cluster analysis, I examine the validities of these dimensions as they apply to Central European legislators, and I attempt to establish a possible role typology.

As there is no uniform electoral system for EP elections, it is a worthwhile attempt to review how politicians behave differently in various electoral systems. Between Central European countries, too, there are different regimes to elect MEPs. Because of this, I entertain the hypothesis that in open list systems where voters have the opportunity to elect individuals, MEPs are more active in domestic public life, campaigns, and in their relationship with citizens (H5). I test this supposition through a survey done amongst Central European

representatives that focused on data about the frequency of an MEP's contacts with domestic public life and campaign activity.

It is equally important to place a politician's behavior within the EP in light of previous career paths and later career ambitions. According to my hypothesis, the career paths sketched out by Scarrow (1997) and Verzichelli and Edinger (2005) are already identifiable with Central European MEPs after the second post-accession cycle, and they can be tied to political roles within the EP. Accordingly, it is not true that the EP is a simple political nursing home. It can just as well be a springboard for (re)entry into national politics or a long-term European political career (H6).

I also examine how roles affect behavior within and outside of the EP. In the former case, I test whether there are differences between representatives in individual role categories within the EP, and whether the policy/politics dimensions of political roles are identifiable in the forms of activities chosen in this legislative institution (H7). An MEP's role is not limited to legislative tasks, however. Keeping in contact with other EU institutions, the media, lobbies and constituents are equally important. For this reason, I also look at whether there are differences between MEPs belonging to the same role categories in terms of their outside activities, and whether politicians' perception of their role is demonstrable in the national/European dimension outwith EP actions (H8).

To test these hypotheses, I have used diverse sources and data. In addition to citing recent research on European parliamentary elites (Beauvallet et al. 2013, Scully et al. 2012, Verzichelli-Edinger 2005), I have also incorporated the results of research on Central European national assemblies (of which it is worth highlighting the studies from Semenova, Edinger and Best's 2014 book and Ilonszki's 2009 work). To analyze political experience, I have created my own database using the main characteristics found in the biographies of Central European MEPs. I used Votewatch's database to collect information on party cohesion and quantifiably documented activities within the EP.

The dissertation, however, would not have been possible without a new survey and a database based on it. Due to a lack of information from Central European representatives, it would have been impossible to draw conclusions about their ideas of representation, political roles, representative attitudes, political ambitions, and activities outside of the EP. Between 5-16 September 2011 and 25 June–July 6 2012, I spent four weeks on personal questionnaire-based



interviews with Czech, Hungarian, , Polish, Slovakian and Slovenian MEPs. A large portion of the questionnaire was taken from the European Parliamentary Research Group's 2010 research on MEPs. For future comparability, I made use of these *verbatim*. Nonetheless, I also added my own questions. Individual research was necessitated by the original EPRG research's lower Central European sample size. In the end, the two inquiries complemented each other harmoniously and resulted in a database on Central European MEPs previously unparalleled in its richness. For my own research, I conducted 33 interviews in Brussels and Strasbourg. Of these, 26 data series made it into the final database. I supplemented this with 19 MEP responses, 12 of which came from Polish MEPs. By unifying the relevant parts of these two surveys, a database was created that offers representative results both according to political groups and members states. In its totality, the Central European MEPs database covered 39.5% of MEPs between 2009 and 2014. The empirical results of this research make several appearances in this work.

### **3. Main findings**

#### **3.1. The embeddedness of Central European MEPs into national politics**

With the accession of Central European countries, representatives were added to the European Parliament who were more connected to national politics than their colleagues from older member states. While the weight of national parliamentary experience continuously declined since the first direct elections, for Central European MEPs the importance of national and governmental experience remained relevant in the first decade. Of the five countries surveyed here, none had less than 50% of their MEPs previously involved in national legislatures in the 2004-2009 and 2009-2014 cycles. The ratio of politicians with governmental experience from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia exceeded the EU average. Czech representatives were the exception in this regard. Due to their significant national political experience, Central European MEPs are most similar to MEPs from the 1979 European Parliament, but they are even more embedded in their domestic political elites than the MEPs from 1979 were. Local politics, however, is a significantly less important base for recruitment in Central Europe when compared to older member states. Half of the European Parliament has local political experience, while in our region this is only surpassed by Czech MEPs. Though with

Polish, Slovakian and Slovenian legislators it is not unusual to have local experience, in Hungary this recruitment channel is almost completely absent.

### **3.2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the Central European MEPs**

It follows logically from the strong national political background that EP mandates meant a new platform mainly to Central European national political elites who were professionalized after the democratic transition. It is thus unsurprising that the region's MEPs show similarities and differences in the same socio-demographic characteristics as their national parliamentary elites. The average MEP is in his or her late 40s and early 50s both in the EU and in Central Europe. Nonetheless, it is generally true that all Central European countries sent political veterans, middle generation individuals, or young and upcoming political juniors as well. Based on the average levels of education in national parliaments, a university diploma is a typical requirement for a political career for those from Central Europe. This is even more so for MEPs. In the first ten years, there were no Polish, Hungarian, Slovakian, and Slovenian representatives without a college degree, and only three Czech politicians lacked this qualification. This occurred even though the ratio of those with higher education in these countries is lower than in EU-15 states. Older member states are more likely to send someone without this particular piece of paper. In relation to the ratio of women, with the exception of the Polish team between 2004 and 2009, all countries brought at least their national parliamentary averages. Hungarian and Slovakian representatives have had, when compared with the generally low national average and the EU standard, a large number of mandates for women. For the most part, the hypothesis referring to the main socio-demographic variables (H2) was proven to be correct. In terms of age and education, the characteristics of national elites were identifiable within EP delegations. At the same time, with the exception of Hungarians and Slovaks, when it came to gender equality in both Central European national assemblies and the European Parliament, the newer members were below the European average.

### **3.3. Central European MEP's integration into their European party groups**

When it came to acquiring important positions and prestigious tasks, the period between 2004 and 2014 proved to be one for education. This is supported by the observation that in the Bureau of the European Parliament and at the helm of committees one could only find a

handful of Central European MEPs, though many highly-trained and experienced political actors switched to a European career. For the few leadership roles, the Polish MEPs were preferred: in the first decade, they were able to utilize the “large member states in large political groups take all” principle best. It is important to mention that experienced representatives from Central Europe have suffered a handicap compared to junior Western European MEPs in terms of grabbing the most important rapporteur positions. Freshly-arrived Central European MEPs, who were less deeply embedded into the EP’s institutional relations, were less effective in securing their interests in this first period. Understanding the rhythm of European political groups was part of this learning period. Indexes on party cohesion verified my hypothesis (H3) and showed that Central European representatives accepted inner operational mechanisms and worked as loyal party members. The EP’s partisan logic grew solid after the new states joined. Not only did Central European legislators resist factionalism, they further strengthened interparty cohesion. Central European MEPs voted with their European parties 92-93% of the time. These figures were even higher in the two largest parliamentary groups. Party cohesion is so strong in the EP that role perceptions were unidentifiable in voting behaviour. For their analysis, different forms of activity were necessary.

### **3.4. MEPs and their roles: A typology**

The role perceptions in this dissertation are not subjective constructs but coherent attitude structures built on a quantitative analysis of answers supplied by MEPs. The research verified the hypothesis that European/national and policy/politics dimensions are suited for the categorization of Central European MEPs (H4). This is so because, due to the special institutional position and inner functioning of the EP, these two dimensions constitute an existing dilemma in the lives of all representatives. The dilemma necessitates a strategic answer to a question which determines the focus and genre of legislative office in terms of how to use scarce resources: time and energy. Along these two axes, we can see four types of ideals. Consequently, Central European MEPs can be divided into the following categories: national politicians, European politicians, national policy-makers and European policy-makers.

### **3.5. Key factors influencing the role choice of Central European MEPs**

Multivariable analyses clearly confirmed the hypothesis of the dissertation's main research question, because socio-demographic and value system-related factors along with political institutional socialization all influence the role orientations of MEPs (H1). The institutional framework and personal preferences both proved to be important, and this strengthened the practical relevance of the neo-institutionalist theoretical framework. Time spent in the EP, age, the nature of previous political experience, the colour code of the European party family, left/right self-definition, and future career ambitions are parameters which allow for a fairly accurate assessment of a politician's role orientation. One important research result is that the policy/politics and European/national axes have different roots: they are explained by different variables. In the former, the most important determining factors are previous political experience and career ambitions. In the latter, the most precise indicators of a politician's position are age, political group, and left/right self-definition. The only factor which aids the forecasting of an MEP's role perception in both dimensions is time spent in the EP, otherwise known as the incumbency factor.

### **3.6. Electoral systems and the activity at the national level**

On its own, the electoral system does not explain a representative's choice of role. Both open and closed list systems have every political role. Preferential voting systems, however, have an obvious effect on how active politicians are in EP campaigns and whether they consider it a priority to provide direct access to their constituents. This is supported by the fact that Hungarian MEPs – who are elected on a closed list – were more passive in the use of all campaign tools than their colleagues from the surrounding countries who had the opportunity to achieve a higher placing on their lists through individual effort. If the possibility of ascension is not present, reelection depends entirely on a personal relationship with party leadership, while communicating with constituents is neglected. In fact, many Hungarian MEPs did not even have an office in their home country in the 2009-2014 cycle, and a majority failed to set visiting hours. In sharp contrast with this, it is quite natural for Czech, Slovakian and Slovenian legislators to have an office in their home countries. For Czech and Polish representatives, personally meeting their electors is an absolute priority. As such, the part of the hypothesis that referred to EP campaigns and contacts with citizens proved to be correct. Nonetheless, relationships with domestic public life are not stronger in either of the

systems. Relations with national parties and the press are important to all, therefore this part of the hypothesis was not justifiable through the research (H5).

### **3.7. Career paths of the Central European MEPs**

The career paths and future career plans of Central European MEPs have confuted the myth of the European Parliament as a political nursing home. The formation of a supranational elite, a process mentioned in the field's international literature since the 1990s, has begun in all five countries. After the first decade, it was clear that there were numerous experienced and committed politicians in Brussels and Strasbourg who viewed the European Parliament as a long-term career goal. All countries in the region have examples of a European career, but bi-directional movement is not self-evident in some places. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there have been no politicians who have reentered their home country as members of the government or in higher offices after serving in the European Parliament. In Hungary, on the other hand, former MEPs have gone on to become presidents of the republic (Pál Schmitt, János Áder) and state secretaries (Enikő Győri, Béla Glattfelder, Zolt Becsey). In Slovenia, Borut Pahor returned as prime minister, and there are several other successful examples of using European mandates as a stepping stone to (re)enter the highest levels of national politics in Poland (Andrzej Duda, Anna Fotyga, Lena Kolarska-Bobinska, Rafał Trzaskowski). The research conducted among Central European MEPs also showed that politicians "running their cool off lap" are a minority: about a third of these representatives could be considered as "European pensioners." The EP offers several paths of political life to parliamentary members, and the current life trajectories and future ambitions of legislators prove the Central European relevance of this hypothesis, too (H6).

Political role perceptions, career paths, and career plans show a few interesting correlations. Governmental experience - of which Central European MEPs have a lot - facilitates a European focus and is explicitly characteristic of European policy-makers. While previous governmental specialization comes in handy for a role perception of public policy specialization within the EP, the more generalized nature of local leadership pushes people towards a more politics-type role perception. It is worth mentioning that MEPs with a policy-maker profile tend to have less of a national parliament background. This shows that for special jobs parties may often bring in outsiders who did not master their respective areas through socialization in a domestic assembly.

Belonging to a role type provides information about MEP's future plans. Of the future plans of Central European representatives, the unpopularity of national mandate should be highlighted. MEPs with a European focus could not see themselves as working in national legislatures in the long term, and those with national focus also shun it. It seems that most consider return to a national parliament after serving in the EP to be a step back, which is, of course a lot less true for being a cabinet member. Amongst the nationally-focused MEPs, being a minister or state secretary would mean an above-average motivation. Simultaneously, nationally-focused MEPs preferred their current positions in below-average numbers. On the other hand, 60% of European-focused MEPs would prefer to keep their current jobs. From amongst the possibilities for mobility, the office of committee chair must be distinguished, which is a relatively popular perspective for European policy-makers.

### **3.8. The roles of Central European MEPs and their activities in the EP**

Activity trends inside and outside the EP demonstrate that the dimensions used to demarcate role orientations are detectable in MEPs' behavior. The differences between political and policy orientations are very visible in officially documented parliamentary genres (H7). As rapporteurs, in the preparation of opinions, and in submitting amendments, individuals with a policy profile are considerably more active than politics-type MEPs (H7). Those with more of a generalist and politics-oriented profile favor plenary speeches, but European politicians are active in submitting questions to other EU institutions as well. The fact that policy-makers show signs of above average activity in policy genres does not mean that they shy away from more political tools (plenary speeches, motions for resolutions, parliamentary questions, written statements). European policy-makers are the most omnivorous representatives. In addition to doing the most amount of work, their political activity does not lag behind their politics-profiled peers. As such, this shows a general hyperactivity on the part of European policy-makers which consists of average political and above average policy work. Those with a politics profile tend to generally be more passive than their policy-making colleagues. They keep a strict distance from policy-making, but they obviously favor political tools.

### **3.9. The roles of Central European MEPs and their activities outside the EP**

Within the EP, the fracture is clear between policy and politics, as expected. When looking at the frequency of activities outside of the EP, however, the difference between European and national foci is verified only partially. The main reason for this is the above mentioned versatility of European policy-makers. Not only do they create strong networks within the European institutional framework, but they also pay attention to nurture ties with national public life. The hypothesis which follows from the national/European foci according to which nationally-oriented representatives formulate closer ties with their country's public life is fulfilled only partially. When viewed against European politicians the difference is indeed visible, and it favors national politicians and national policy-makers. In other words, the hypothesis applies to national MEPs, but out of those with European profiles it only applies to politics-focused individuals (H8). In the case of the latter, the European orientation weakens motivation to keep in touch with constituents and the press back home. One may answer to the second part of the hypothesis created for the main research question that there is a difference between certain political roles for activities within and outwith the EP, but while policy/politics orientation is very much identifiable in terms of intra-EP activity, the national/European focus is less apparent in work outside of the EP, thanks to the hyperactivity of European policymakers (H1).

In the field of activities outside of the EP, the significance of the policy/politics axis is detectable, too. It is almost exclusively true that only MEPs open to policy-making seek contact with the European Commission, and it is them who lobbyist and other interest groups try to meet. Those with a political profile have almost no contact with these actors. This is understandable, since the European Commission has a strong policy-making character, and also because lobbyists know exactly that public policy dossiers are affected best through policy-makers.

The political roles sketched out in this dissertation form coherent attitudinal and behavioral structures, but this does not mean that MEPs cannot be open to multiple directions. As it is true for literature on political roles in general, in this case, too, the roles are not exclusive. Instead, it is rather adequate to speak of dominant roles. Clear-cut roles are rare. These categories are useful to show the most characteristic faces of MEPs. Thanks to the rich

database on Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Slovakian and Slovenian representatives, it was possible to unify role orientations and MEP activities. Through the example of Central European legislators, it was possible to get closer to understanding what motivates MEPs, the institutional and political circumstances among which they must create their behavioral strategies, and how adopted roles correlate with their everyday legislative activities.



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## 5. The author's publications related to the subject

### Journal articles in Hungarian

1. Bíró-Nagy, András [2015]: Közép-európai EP-képviselők és szerepeik. Viselkedési stratégiák az Európai Parlamentben. In: *Politikatudományi Szemle* (24) 2., pp. 91-119.
2. Bíró Nagy, András [2010]: Európai Parlament: politikai elfekvő vagy ugródeszka? In: *Kommentár* (5) 2., pp. 97-107.

### Working paper in Hungarian

3. Bíró Nagy, András – Boros Tamás – Varga Áron [2012]: *Euroszepticismus Magyarországon*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Budapest.

### Conference paper in Hungarian

4. Bíró Nagy, András [2010]: Kivel tartanak? Pártkohézió az Európai Parlamentben. In: *XI. RODOSZ Konferencia-kötet*. Metaforma: Kolozsvár, pp. 27-44.

### Book chapter in English

5. Bíró Nagy, András [2011]: Party cohesion in the European Parliament after enlargement. In: Arató Krisztina et al. (szerk.): *Structures and Futures of Europe*. Ad Librum: Budapest, pp. 115-128.