

A new roadblock against progressive European integration?

The New Direction Foundation and its partner network of think tanks across Europe

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After the rejection of the European constitution by popular votes in France and the Netherlands in 2005 the European Commission stepped up support for European political parties. Legal recognition and limited funding was extended to European Political Party Foundations linked to EP factions. The new foundations and their national partners started to operate in 2008. Preliminary research on European foundations and their partner networks (mostly think tanks) suggest to think of them as socializing networks that provide legitimacy for European institutions (Dakowska 2009 a, b) or, more political, as instruments of European political parties (Gagatek/van Hecke 2011). They have been promoted to provide a new impetus to European political integration (Leinen 2007). However, there have been no empirical studies of the European foundation networks so far that can substantiate these claims.

Based on Gagatek and van Hecke's observation of strong asymmetries with regard to domestic representation of the smaller European political parties in particular, we will observe the peculiar mix of sponsors and constituencies behind the New Direction Foundation plus 23 partner think tanks, which has been created in 2010 by the European Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists. In a small field study we used a sophisticated mix of methods (including a semantic wiki, social network analysis and the expertise of local researchers) to examine the structure of the youngest European Party Foundation also linked to the right wing EP group ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists, 52 MEPs led by the British Tories). Our results show that more than half of the NDF think tanks operate in countries without a link to a political party that is member to AECR or a MEP who is member of ECR. These think tanks provide for a link of the political parties and the parliamentary group to a longer existing, heavily interwoven network of neo-liberal/conservative think tanks and academics across Europe. Our study of the NDF and its partners explains the ways in which right wing economic Euroscepticism can rely on civil society organizations way beyond traditional political party structures. NDF and partners certainly do not aim to provide wholesale legitimacy for European institutions, nor can they be considered a straightforward instrument of the European political party and the contribution to European integration might be the paradoxical outcome of its efforts to slow down or roll back integration rather than a result of its own direct actions and intentions.

The project we plan to present is not a traditional academic project: The data we gathered throughout the project is accessible in nearly any machine readable format for the experienced user and searchable through the Wikimedia-frontend for the 'normal' user. Additionally we build up a backend of forms to alleviate the data-entry process, which allows us to give even technically inexperienced academics the possibility to add to our data base. Thus the project is

– other than usual – not a singular snapshot in time but an ongoing process dedicated to promote research and to provide a service to the general public.

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Gagatek, W./van Hecke, S. (2011): Towards Policy-Seeking Europarties: The Development of European Political Foundations. *EUI Working Paper RSCAS 2011/58*.

Leinen, Jo et al. (2007): European Political Foundations: Prospects and Objectives. *Proceedings of a Workshop on amending the Regulation on the Statue and Financing of European Political Parties*. Online: www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/afco/studiesdownload.html?languageDocument=EN&file=19631