Inter-parliamentary cooperation in EU affairs and the Austrian Parliament: Empowering the Opposition?

Eric Miklin (University of Salzburg, VII/2011)

eric.miklin@sbg.ac.at


Abstract:

This paper takes up recent arguments to strengthen national parliamentary powers in EU decision-making through inter-parliamentary cooperation. By widening the analytical focus from parliaments to the cooperation amongst the parties within parliaments, it seeks to advance the debate in two aspects. First, the paper aims at providing a more accurate picture about the cooperation going on today. Second, it discusses why the amount of, and the benefits gained from inter-parliamentary cooperation may vary between parties and therefore cooperation may not only affect the power-relations between national parliaments and non-parliamentarian actors, but also those within parliaments. Based on the results of a study of the Austrian parliament it is argued that inter-parliamentary cooperation (a) is more important for opposition parties than for governing parties but that (b) parties can make use of its full potential only, when their ideology allows them to integrate into a European party network.

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Introduction

Discussing possible ways to reduce the EU’s alleged democratic deficit, the idea to strengthen national parliamentary powers through inter-parliamentary cooperation (IPC) has been a recurring theme since the early 1990s. According to this idea, national parliaments (NP) should build parliamentary networks with other NPs and the European Parliament (EP) to pool their powers and resources. This would not only help them to increase their control over their governments, but also make their voices better heard by other European actors (e.g. Maurer 2002, Maurer 2009, Peters et al. 2010, Slaughter 2004, pp.104-130, Judge 1995, Westlake 1995).

Over the years, several political initiatives have been taken to foster IPC like inter-parliamentary meetings such as COSAC (the ‘Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union’) or, just recently, the introduction of the ‘Early Warning Mechanism’ with the Lisbon Treaty. Compared to these efforts on the political level, empirical knowledge about the actual amount of IPC going on and the role it plays for NPs in their dealing with the European level is still limited (Bengtson 2007, p.62). Also, there are quite critical views about its actual and future potential (Raunio 2009, p.322), and scholars have pointed to the various difficulties, that hamper effective IPC (e.g. Costa and Latek 2001, Kiiver 2006). Therefore, this paper aims at shedding some light on the actual amount of IPC going on, and on the effect it has (or may have in the future) on the power relations in the EU’s ‘national’ channel of democratic representation.

To do so, the paper shifts the focus from NPs to the actors within the parliaments—parliamentary parties. So far, debates about IPC have treated NPs almost exclusively as unitary actors and have focused on the official interactions between parliaments themselves. This is problematic for two reasons. First, looking only at parliaments runs the risk to underestimate the actual amount and the functionality of cooperation going on. This, because a large part of the interactions between European parliaments actually may take place between party groups from different parliaments holding similar interests (e.g. Crum and Fossum 2009, p.262, Miklin and Crum 2011, Slaughter 2004, pp.105 – 106).

Secondly, treating NPs as unitary actors may also deliver only an incomplete picture about the potential effects of IPC on power relations in EU decision-making. This, because it neglects
that the opportunities to engage in IPC, as well as its functionality, may vary considerably between parties. IPC, therefore, may not only strengthen NPs vis-à-vis other, non parliamentarian, actors but might also affect the power relations within parliaments.

Regarding this latter point, two arguments are developed. First, it is argued that the functionality of, and the motivation to engage in, IPC is higher for opposition parties than for governing parties. This, because it provides them with a way to get information about what is going on on the European level, and to make their voices heard in the process—two things, where governing parties often are able to fall back on the support of the government. Second, it is argued that parties whose programmes fit the European party framework engage more actively and successfully in IPC than parties where this is not the case. This, because the latter usually lack both the partners holding similar interests and the institutional framework for fruitful cooperation on the party level.

Both arguments are evaluated through a small-n study on the Austrian parliament and its interactions with other European parliaments. The results, overall, show a considerable amount of IPC especially in the party channel. They also show that the amount and the functionality of IPC vary within parliaments. IPC indeed seems to be more helpful for opposition parties than for governing parties. However, opposition parties can make use of its full potential only, when their ideology allows them to integrate themselves into a European party network.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next two sections introduce the idea of IPC and develop the arguments, why the functionality and the absolute amount of cooperation may vary within NPs. Section 3 briefly introduces the research design and explains the case selection. In section 4, 5, and 6, the empirical findings are presented and discussed in light of the theoretical framework. Section 7 concludes.

**Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation in EU Decision-Making: bringing parties into focus**

There is broad agreement within scholarly debates that—despite several improvements over the last years (O'Brennan and Raunio 2007, Raunio and Hix 2000)—national parliamentarians
still face major difficulties when trying to keep track of the processes on the EU level (e.g. Maurer and Wessels 2001, Wessels et al. 2003, for a review of the debates see: Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2008, Raunio 2009). A recurring idea to at least reduce this problem has been to increase parliamentary powers through mutual cooperation between NPs and between them and the EP (Maurer 2002, Maurer 2009, Peters et al. 2010, Slaughter 2004, pp.104 – 130, Judge 1995, Westlake 1995).

Starting already in the early 1990s, also on the political level, several initiatives to foster IPC have been undertaken. First, various forms of multi-lateral parliamentary meetings have been introduced like COSAC, ‘Joint Parliamentary Meetings’ or inter-parliamentary meetings on the committee level. On a bi-lateral level, NPs have sought to strengthen their vertical links with the EP (e.g. by incorporating their countries’ MEPs into their EU related activities) but also their horizontal links with other NPs. Finally, the ‘Early Warning Mechanism’ in the ‘Protocol on the Application of the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality’ attached to the Lisbon Treaty just recently has introduced for the first time a formal (although limited) role for NPs as a collective actor in EU decision-making.¹

Looking at how cooperation could increase NP powers, two functions can be distinguished: information and coordination. First, IPC may help national parliamentarians to stay informed about what is going on in EU decision-making. Research suggests that parliaments often lack the resources to adequately screen the processes on the EU level in addition to their usual tasks as legislators on the national level (Blümel and Neuhold 2001, Pollak and Slominski 2003). This bears the risk to miss important dossiers on which the government takes up a position that is not in line with the NP’s interest.

Sharing parliamentary resources appears as a promising way to deal with this problem. Not only is the risk to miss an important dossier much lower for 27 NPs than for a single parliament and may national parliamentarians profit from the privileged access of their colleagues in the EP to the decision-making process. IPC also increases parliamentarians’ knowledge about the positions of other actors involved in the negotiations. This provides them with a better picture about the ‘win-sets’ present at the European level and hence allows them to better evaluate their own government’s position.
When cooperation turns into coordination, it may not only help NPs to detect issues where there is a risk that EU decision-making harms their interests. If parliamentarians from different NPs manage to agree on joint positions and strategies, this may also help them to push the outcome of legislative processes towards their ideal point. Together, parliamentarians can pressure their governments along agreed lines. If also members of the EP join their coalition, the Council and the Commission can be squeezed from two sides.

However, several authors have raised their doubts against the actual potential of IPC. According to Costa and Latek (2001), cooperation between parliaments is seriously constrained by (a) different national institutional settings and political cultures in the MS, (b) rivalries between NPs and the EP and (c) very heterogeneous interests between, but also within parliaments from different MS. Interest heterogeneity is also a reason why Kiiver (2006: p.131) qualifies the coordinative function of IPC. According to him, successful coordination requires at least some overlap of interest and mutual trust, which is unlikely to be found very often between parliaments from different MS. Additionally, for NPs it would be more efficient to spend their time at home pressuring their government, than to meet other parliamentarians on which they lack any formal power. The informative function again is challenged as highly overrated by Raunio (2009, p.324). In his view, parliaments can get information much easier at home from sources like their own government or national ministries then by travelling to other parliaments.

Empirically, today’s knowledge about what is actually going on in terms of IPC is too limited to judge which view is correct (Bengtson 2007, p.62). Beyond that, however, research on IPC is faced with another shortcoming. Like research on NPs in EU affairs generally, it so far has treated NPs largely as unitary actors and looked only at the official interactions between parliaments themselves (but see Neunreither 2005 for a notable exception). This is problematic for two reasons.

First, looking only at official interactions between parliaments might deliver only an incomplete picture about the amount and the substance of IPC going on. There are good reasons to assume that a large (if not the major) part of the interactions between parliaments does not take place on the official parliamentary level, but rather between party groups from different parliaments (e.g. Crum and Fossum 2009, p.262, Miklin and Crum 2011, Slaughter
2004, pp.105-106). The party channel adds a variety of additional possibilities for cooperation between parliaments like between MEPs and MPs from the same national parties (e.g. Raunio 2000, Raunio 2007, pp.134-136), but also between MPs from other parties. Also, as the interest heterogeneity between and within particular parties on average should be much smaller than between parliaments at large, cooperation in the party channel may also work more successfully (cf. Costa and Latek 2001).

Second, treating NPs as unitary actors neglects the fact that IPC might deliver an incomplete picture about the effect of IPC on power relations in the EU’s national channel of representation. Parties within parliaments are very diverse. Differences can be found not only regarding their interests, but also regarding their resources or the functions they fulfil within a parliament. Hence, it seems unlikely that all parties in a particular parliament follow exactly the same patterns neither with regard to their involvement in EU decision-making in general, nor when looking at IPC. If this is true, however, IPC may not only increase NP powers vis-à-vis other actors but also affect power relations within the parliaments.

This paper therefore focuses especially on the question, whether there are differences between national parliamentary parties with regard to their engagement in IPC and how these differences can be explained. IPC in this context is defined not only as official meetings between parliaments, but as any kind of cooperation (with or without meeting face-to-face) between representatives from NPs and/or the EP in the context of their EU-related activities.

Hypothesising differences in inter-parliamentary cooperation within parliaments

Why may there be differences between parties belonging to the same NP regarding IPC? Below, two arguments are developed, focusing on the two major factors that differentiate parties in NPs: their status within the parliament (i.e. whether they are in government or in opposition) and the objectives they pursue (i.e. their ideology).²

*Party Status*
Treating parliaments as unitary actors that control their governments is a common phenomenon in research on NPs in the EU (but see Holzhacker 2005). However, the view of parliament and government as two independent bodies is problematic—also when discussing the potential of IPC. European parliamentary democracies today are largely based on party government (Blondel and Cotta 2001). As a result, the main lines of contestation usually do not run between the parliament and the government, but rather between the opposition parties on the one hand and the governing parties together with the government on the other hand.

Building a ‘bloc’ with the government, governing parties hold several advantages vis-à-vis opposition parties in EU decision-making. First, they can get necessary information much easier from the government than opposition parties. Also, for opposition parties it is way more problematic to rely on the information provided by the government as the interest heterogeneity between opposition and government in most of the cases is much larger than between governing parties and the government. Therefore, opposition parties, much more than governing parties, need to rely on information coming from other sources than from the institution they seek to control.3

Cooperation with other parliaments or party groups here may be particularly fruitful. Not only does it provide information about the things going on and the interests of other parliaments and MS. If an opposition party cooperates with MPs from governing parties in other MS, cooperation can even provide it with direct information about the processes and negotiations within the Council.

Thinking of NPs in terms of government and opposition also qualifies Raunio’s critique on the informative function of IPC (see above). Governing parties indeed may get information easier from their governments than via IPC. But this is not necessarily the case for opposition parties. Hence, in sum the informative function should be higher for opposition parties than for governing parties.

The dominance of party government also qualifies Kiiver’s critique on the coordinative function of IPC (see above). Indeed, governing parties usually can push through their interests more easily by pressuring their own government than by entering the EU level. Also to change the position of other actors, governing parties in most cases can rely on the support of
the government. However, the opposition usually cannot count on the support of the government. Being outnumbered in the parliament for them IPC may often be the only way to bypass their government, to look for allies and make their voices heard, or more generally to coordinate their activities with other actors.

In sum, the informative as well as the coordinative function of IPC should be higher for opposition parties than for governing parties. *Therefore opposition parties should (a) ascribe a higher importance to IPC and (b) engage more actively in inter-parliamentary contacts than governing parties* (Hypothesis 1).

**Ideological fit**

A second main factor that differentiates parties not only in NPs but generally is of course the objectives they pursue or, more generally, their ideology. Thinking about how different ideological stances may impact on a party’s engagement in IPC two factors come to one’s mind. First, differences may be driven by different positions on the main dimension of party contestation in Western Europe—the left-right axis. Research on national parties shows a clear correlation between a party’s view on how EU integration should proceed and its position in terms of Left and Right (Hooghe *et al.* 2002). Also, left and right parties often hold different views regarding the role the EP should play within the EU. Hence, there might also be differences regarding the question, whether NPs should be strengthened in general or regarding IPC in particular. Another factor causing differences might be the question, whether or not EU integration should advance at all—i.e. parties’ positions on the pro-contra-integration dimension.

However, a study of Wessels (1999) on the attitudes of national and European MPs has revealed no systematic differences between members of left and right parties regarding (a) whether the powers of NPs should be increased or (b) coordination between the national and the European level should be enhanced (with two thirds of all MPs asked arguing for IPC mechanisms like JCMs). Also, as Costa and Latek (2001, pp.150) have argued, attitudes towards further integration should not have any impact on parties attitudes towards IPC. Indeed, IPC may be seen as a tool to prevent further integration (by strengthening NPs vis-à-
vis the EP) as well as to ease integration (by defusing conflicts between levels and parliaments).

Still, while a party’s ideology may not have an impact on its motivation to engage in IPC, it may well have an impact on its abilities to cooperate. When Kiiver (2006, p.13) states, that successful cooperation across parliaments requires at least a certain amount of trust and overlap of interests the same of course is true for parties. Cooperation in the party channel therefore is much more likely to proceed between parties that share similar views in various areas.

Indeed, we see that today national parties in Europe group almost exclusively along ideological lines. European party federations and EP groups either mirror established European party families, or they pool parties that share common views at least on some, for them very salient, issues (like e.g. Euro-scepticism). Both, Europarties as well as EP groups also have come to institutionalise an increasing number of ‘get-togethers’ which provide a nice framework and regular opportunities for IPC in the party channel.

However, for parties that have a very distinct ideological profile that does not fit nicely with the profiles of a substantial number of other parties, cooperation in the party channel should be much more difficult. These parties cannot fall back on an established network of parties holding similar views and regular meetings. Rather they have to organise their cooperation on a case-to-case basis—if they find partners to cooperate with at all.

In sum, parties with a very distinct ideological profile often lack the partners and the institutional framework for cooperation in the party channel. Therefore, parties whose ideological ‘fit’ enables them to join a European party federation and/or EP group should engage in IPC more intensively than non affiliated parties (Hypothesis 2).
Case Selection and Research Design

To evaluate the plausibility of the arguments developed above, a qualitative small-n study of the contacts of the party groups in the Austrian parliament with other European parliaments was conducted. Due to the lack of any empirical data regarding potential differences in IPC between parliaments so far (cf. Raunio 2009) it is difficult to judge, whether the Austrian parliament constitutes a most-likely, least-likely, or even representative case when it comes to its parliamentarians engagement in cooperation.

However, the Austrian case provides interesting variation regarding the main question, this paper addresses—whether there are differences in cooperation between parties, how they can be explained and how they may affect the standing of the parties. At the time, research was conducted (autumn of 2009), there were six parties represented in the parliament of which five were included in the study (see Table 1). Two of them, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), both populist right-wing parties, are not a member of a Europarty. Additionally, the two MEPs of the FPÖ are not a member of an EP party group and the BZÖ at that time did not even have an own MEP. Both parties are currently in opposition but were member of the government during the time from 1999 until 2006.

The remaining three parties—the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the Austrian Green Party—are all represented in the EP, where their MEPs are affiliated to EP party groups. Also, they are members of their respective European party federations. While the ÖVP has always been in government since Austria’s EU accession in 1995, the Green Party has never entered office so far. The SPÖ, again, has been in government from 1995 until 1999 and again since 2006, but was in opposition during the years from 1999 until 2006.

Table 1 about here

In sum, the five party groups in the Austrian parliament provide an interesting sample of parties that (a) are in government or opposition, or have changed their status rather recently
and that (b) are closely integrated into the European party framework or are not integrated at all.

The analysis is based to a large extent on semi-structured expert interviews with a civil servant from the Austrian parliament’s international office as well as with one former and eleven actual representatives of the five party groups. For all parties, MPs and members of the party staff were asked who have been playing an important role in their parties’ EU related activities and hence have a good overview about their party’s activities in the field of IPC and have been involved themselves in their party’s cross-parliamentarian activities. Interviewees were asked to reply as experts for their parties, not just to report their personal views. The questions asked addressed three areas: (1) the current amount of cooperation going on, how it has evolved over time and whether parties actively seek to increase it; (2) the parties’ main channels of and reasons for cooperation (3) the actual role IPC plays in the parties’ dealing with the EU, also compared to other channels of cooperation or information.\

Channels and Frequency of Cooperation

The Level of Parliaments

Since the introduction of the biannual COSAC conferences in 1989, various additional forms of official inter-parliamentary meetings like ‘Joint Parliamentary Meetings’ (JPM), ‘Joint-Committee Meetings’ (JCM) and ‘Inter-parliamentary Committee Meetings’ have evolved. Especially since 2005, the frequency of these multilateral meetings has increased rapidly. In 2008, they added up to a total of 27 meetings (European Parliament 2009). On its website, the EP provides participant lists for 29 JPMs, JCMs, and Inter-parliamentary Committee Meetings held in Brussels between 2009 and July 2011. According to these lists, Austrian MPs joined 24 out of these 29 meetings. This is in line with the statement of a representative from the Austrian parliaments office for international affairs according to which the parliament usually participates in all these meetings. This means that Austrian MPs meet with member of other parliaments on a multi-lateral level on average about every other week (Int08:120).
Contacts on the multi-lateral level are complemented by an again increasing number of bi-
lateral visits of delegations from the Austrian EU committee in NPs of neighbouring countries
or the NP of the country holding the Presidency, as well as by incoming visits from other NPs
(Int05:381, Int07:297, Int05:412).

Looking at differences between the party groups in the Austrian parliament, the representative
of the parliament’s international office was not able to detect significant differences regarding
the motivation of MPs from different groups to attend meetings with other parliaments.
(Int08:403). Still, differences regarding the frequency of the parties’ attendance do exist as a
result of the parliament’s rules regarding how many, and which, MPs are allowed to join the
different meetings. To COSAC, JPMs and JCMs the parliament currently sends seven MPs
(two from SPÖ and ÖVP, one from FPÖ, BZÖ and Green Party). Also to bi-lateral meetings
at least one representative is invited from all parties. To the rapidly increasing number of
multi-lateral committee meetings, however, only the two (co-) chairs of the respective
committees of both parliamentary chambers (Nationalrat and Bundesrat) are sent. Since
committee (co-) chairs in the parliament are distributed in proportion to the groups’ size, this
means that smaller parties (FPÖ, BZÖ, Green Party) are able to attend these meetings less
often than the two largest parties (SPÖ and ÖVP) (Int08:131).

The data provided on the EP’s website supports this view. For JPMs and JCMs, participation
rates are fairly balanced with each party group attending between 10 and 13 out of 16
meetings. The picture clearly changes when looking at Inter-parliamentary Committee
Meetings. In the 13 meetings, for which data is available, SPÖ and ÖVP both took part seven
times, followed by the BZÖ with just two and the FPÖ with only one appearance. The Green
group did not participate once.

The Level of Parties
IPC on the level of parliaments is indeed complemented by a large and increasing amount of
cooperation on the level of parties. First, there are of course contacts between national MPs
and MEPs from their own national party. Despite major organisational obstacles reported by
SPÖ, ÖVP and the Greens (Int01:230, Int02:295, Int03:225, Int06:205), contacts with their
own MEPs are generally seen as the main channel for IPC by all Austrian party groups represented in the EP (Int02:108; Int07:114; Int09:209; Int05:175).

Beyond that, SPÖ, ÖVP and the Green Party also increasingly cooperate with MEPs and MPs from sister-parties in other MS, which is usually organised on the party-group level. All three parties reported that inter-parliamentary meetings more and more are combined with meetings on the party level. Social democrats today hold regular meetings in the context of COSAC and COFACC (the ‘Conference of Foreign Affairs Committee Chairpersons’), and increasingly also during meetings on the committee level (Int03:65). Green parliamentarians during the last years have started to meet regularly in the context of COSAC and often during JPMs and JCMs (Int01:26/44; Int02:25). Meetings between the ÖVP and its colleagues in the context of inter-parliamentary meetings so far do not take place on a regular basis but again have increased during the last years and are expected to increase further in the future (Int05:83, Int06:138).

Multi-lateral meetings for all three parties also are organised on a case-to-case basis, for instance when the EP group invites its national counterparts to discuss a ‘hot’ topic. In addition, social democratic group leaders meet every six months in the country holding the presidency where the hosting party group informs its colleagues about its country’s plans for the Presidency (Int03:50). Regarding the ÖVP, the EPP group, as of around 2008, has started to organise meetings on the level of party leaders every three months (Int05:288).

Contacts on the multi-lateral level are complemented by (mainly issue-driven) cooperation on a bi-lateral basis. The SPÖ visits the EP group about once every year and also holds contact with NP party groups who show similar ‘ideological’ views (esp. the Social Democratic groups of Germany, France, and Scandinavia) (Int07:123). Bi-lateral contacts of the ÖVP mainly take place with the German Union Parties as well as with some parties from the new Eastern MS (Int05:442). The Green party is in regular informal contact with the EP group and the Green group in the German Bundestag (Int01:111, Int02:85). Additionally, the Green group seeks to cooperate with national groups that are represented in their national government whenever possible (Int01:127, Int02:126).
For the FPÖ and the BZÖ cooperation on the party level is rare. As both parties are not a member of an EP group or an established party family, they are more or less excluded from any kind of cooperation on a multi-lateral basis. Both parties suffer from this situation and hence try to change it—so far, with little success though. For the BZÖ, founded only in 2005, attempts to integrate itself into the European party-framework are only ‘in statu nascendi’ (Int04:74). The FPÖ for about 10 years has undertaken intense, but mostly unsuccessful, efforts to either join an existing EP group or to create a new one (Int09:53). Several attempts to join the group ‘Europe of Freedom and Democracy’ (EFD) have all failed so far (Int09:91/175).

Both parties seek to compensate for this lack of multi-lateral cooperation through cooperation outside the EP. For the BZÖ, also here contacts are very limited (Int04:71). The FPÖ currently upholds rather close contacts with four European parties (the Italian Lega Nord, the Belgian Flaams Belang, the French Front National and the Danish Volks Partijet) and tries to further expand its network to right-wing parties of the new MS (Int09:91/175).

### Functions of Cooperation

#### Information

Looking first at the level of parliaments, the informative function of meetings varies both between different kind of meetings and between parties. The meetings fulfilling the highest informational function are multilateral meetings on the committee level. These meetings either focus on proposals currently discussed, or provide MPs with a general overview about the issues the Presidency is planning to put on the table within the next few months. For SPÖ, ÖVP and the Greens these meetings provide valuable information and a fast overview about current discussions on the EU level (Int03:175, see also Int01:151, Int02:240, Int06:115).

However, the extent to which party groups benefit from this information varies as smaller groups hardly are able to attend these meetings (see above). Also, there currently is no system to feed the information received back into the work of the NP (Int03:205, Int04:60, Int05:151; Int06:131). As a result, the informative function of committee meetings is less developed for smaller parties, especially for the BZÖ (Int04:56) and the Green party (Int01:19, Int04:56).
For most other meetings, the direct informational function, compared to other sources of information, is seen to be rather low (Int02:221, Int03:290, Int04:19, Int07:118). Interviewees from SPÖ, ÖVP and the Green party stressed that these meetings mainly fulfil an indirect function as (a) they help to make national MPs more aware for the processes on the European level and (b) allow them to build up networks with MPs from other parliaments (Int02:60, Int04:66, Int07:105, Int06:80). Hence, while the meetings themselves are not seen as that interesting, they may help to improve cooperation outside the official framework.

As such networks are usually built between MPs from sister parties, this indirect function is less developed for the FPÖ and the BZÖ. Indeed, a member of the BZÖ criticised these ‘useless’ meetings for being first and foremost a pretext for other parties to meet their party fellows (Int04:19). Also a representative of the FPÖ regretted that the FPÖ’s representatives at all these meetings usually are standing around rather alone (Int09:23).

Looking next at cooperation on the level of parties, two similarities can be observed. First, for those party groups that (are able to) engage in cooperation in the party channel (SPÖ, ÖVP, Green Party and, to some extent, FPÖ), the informational function is higher than in the parliamentary channel. Second, exchanging and gathering information is probably the most important function of cooperation. However, the importance of cooperation with other groups in relation to other sources of information varies between parties.

For the Green group especially cooperation with the EP group is highly important (Int02:93). This because the EP group is usually earlier and better informed, and—in contrast to the Austrian NP group—has the resources to cover and scrutinise all policy fields. Hence, the EP group often acts as a kind of ‘early warning mechanism’ for the national group (Int02:84). Cooperation appears to be especially important as for the Green group it is often difficult to get sufficient information from the government directly. First, the Austrian parliament’s EU committees today meet only seldom and hence just a very limited number of dossiers are discussed at all. Secondly, quite often the responsible government members do not show up at these meetings (Int01:194, Int02:340).
This latter problem was also stressed by BZÖ and FPÖ (Int09:309, Int04:216). However, given the restricted possibilities to engage in inter-party cooperation, for these parties the possibilities to compensate for the lack of information received from the government through IPC are limited.

SPÖ and ÖVP, like the Green party, increasingly make use of other parties as a source of information. However, for both groups this is only an additional source amongst other, often more important ones. In addition to contacts with national interest groups and with EU institutions themselves, for both groups contacts with the SPÖ-ÖVP led government are currently most important.

Especially for the ÖVP, the informational function seems to play a smaller role, as in general the ‘daily EU business’ within the party has always been dominated very much by their government representatives (Int06:258, Int05:201). Also for the SPÖ, the ‘government’-channel works fine—at least for those dossiers where the ministry in charge is held by the party. Still, now and then the SPÖ uses its networks to get information about ongoing processes like recently from the SPD group in the German Bundestag regarding the discussions after the German Constitutional Court’s judgement related to the Lisbon Treaty (Int07:188). However, cooperation especially with their own MEPs but also with MPs from other MS played a somewhat bigger role when the party was in opposition between 1999 and 2006 (Int03:217, Int07:114).

Coordination
The direct coordinative function of meetings on the level of parliaments is generally seen to be low. The only meeting, where SPÖ, ÖVP and the Green Party expect cooperation to play a greater role in the future is COSAC, which they expect to take a leading role with regard to the coordination of activities related to the new ‘Early Warning Mechanism’ (Int03:141, Int08:224, Int07:41). To some extent, however, also the other meetings may be seen to stimulate coordination at least indirectly as they help MPs to improve their transnational networks for coordination on the party level (see above).
Still, also on the level of parties, for most groups (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, and BZÖ), real coordination (in terms of agreeing to common positions and developing common strategies) so far plays only a subordinated role. However, these parties expect coordination to rise in the future and/or actively seek to increase it. The latter is the case for FPÖ and BZÖ. While currently having little possibilities for cross-border coordination, especially the FPÖ sees this as a problem as the party is well aware that a small party, coming from a small country, alone has little chances to have any impact on EU decision-making (Int09:65).

For the ÖVP it is indeed the party channel where coordination is taking place (Int05:89). However, while coordination is expected to play a greater role in coming years (Int05:288), the NP group’s involvement today is still limited. If the party is looking for allies, this runs mainly via the party’s representatives in the government who then also coordinate their activities directly with the party’s MEPs (Int05:201, Int06:254).

The coordinative function of cooperation is currently seen as secondary to the informative function also for the SPÖ group. But there are exceptions to this rule. A prominent example (notably stemming from the time, when the party was in opposition) was the EU Services directive. Here, the SPÖ several times met with other social-democratic groups in the EP but also in the German Bundestag not only to discuss the directive, but also to coordinate their positions and activities (Int03:255, Int10:444).

The one party, where coordination indeed seems to play a significant role already today is the Green group. Multi-lateral meetings between Green MPs usually go clearly beyond mere discussions and informing each other about what is going on. The EGP Council, for instance, regularly agrees on resolutions concerning various issues, which then are taken as a basis for further common actions in NPs and the EP (Int01:97). For the Austrian NP group, positions agreed on during such meetings set an important reference point and hence often have a direct effect on the group’s position in the NP. In fact, the group rarely deviates from them and, if so, this usually happens only after intense internal debates (Int02:140).

Two further observations seem worth mentioning. First, via their coordinative meetings Green parties also aim at supporting each other at different levels. The EP group, for example, time and again takes up concerns raised by national groups that are not represented in the EP at
debates in the EP (Int01:88). Second, coordination increasingly also takes place with regard to national legislative processes. While so far this phenomenon is still at its infancy, Green groups increasingly seek to coordinate their activities in national politics e.g. by bringing in legislative proposals at the same time (Int01:51).

Discussion

Looking first at the aggregate level, the empirical results show a considerable amount of contacts between the Austrian parliament and other European parliaments. Multi-lateral inter-parliamentary meetings attended by Austrian parliamentarians have multiplied over the last few years and are accompanied with various forms of cooperation on the bi-lateral level. Cooperation on the level of parliaments is complemented with cooperation on the party level. Again, the amount of cooperation on this level has clearly increased over the last years and all party groups in the Austrian parliament not only expect it to increase further in the future, but also actively seek to contribute to this development.

Disaggregating the results to the level of party groups shows quite some variation regarding (a) the groups’ engagement in IPC and (b) the question, how important they perceive IPC to be for their daily dealing with the EU (see Table 2). Overall, three ‘types’ of engagement were found amongst the five party groups. First, there are groups that actively participate in cooperation and for whom cooperation indeed plays a significant role (the Green group and, to some extent, the SPÖ group between 1999 and 2006). Second, there are party groups that participate quite actively, but for whom cooperation plays only a minor or additional role in their daily EU business (the ÖVP and the SPÖ group today). Finally, there are groups that engage in cooperation only to a very limited extent (FPÖ and BZÖ).

Table 2 about here

These results lend some support to the two hypotheses formulated. Looking first at Hypothesis 2, they support the argument that parties, whose ideology enables them to join a European party federation and/or EP group, engage more intensively in IPC than non
affiliated parties. With SPÖ, ÖVP, and the Green Party, all three ‘integrated’ parties engage much more in cooperation than the non-affiliated groups of FPÖ and BZÖ.

Also, comments of the latter parties’ representatives suggest that this is not the case because FPÖ and BZÖ do not want to cooperate. On the contrary, both parties actively seek to increase cooperation. However, not being integrated into a European party network, both parties are more or less excluded from any cooperation in the party channel. For one, this creates a disadvantage in terms of quantity and quality, as for the other parties a large and the more substantive part of IPC is taking place on the party- rather than on the parliamentary level. Beyond that, it also reduces the functionality of IPC on the parliamentary level for the parties. This, because one of the main assets of IPC in the parliamentary channel seems to be that it provides a framework for exactly the kind of cooperation on the party level from which FPÖ and BZÖ are excluded.

Looking at Hypothesis 1, the differences found between the three ‘integrated’ groups also support the argument that IPC is more important for opposition parties than for governing parties. Unfortunately, the qualitative data gathered through the interviews is not precise enough to judge reliably whether there are differences in the absolute amount of IPC between the Green Party on the one hand and SPÖ and ÖVP on the other.

However, coordination—both in terms of information and cooperation—clearly seems to play a much smaller role for the latter than for the former. For SPÖ and ÖVP, IPC provides only one additional source of information and cooperation regarding EU decision-making. For both groups, their main sources currently are their party colleagues sitting in the government. Lacking the government as a reliable channel for information, IPC for the Green group fulfills an important informative function. In addition, cooperation amongst Green groups usually also involves (a) coordination of their positions and activities in different parliaments, as well as (b) mutual support on different parliamentary levels. Again in line with Hypothesis 1, also for the SPÖ cooperation played a greater role when the party was in opposition between 1999 and 2006.

The results for FPÖ and BZÖ, finally, suggest that both hypotheses are strongly linked. Like the Green party, both parties perceive themselves as clearly disadvantaged when it comes to
information and coordination compared to the two governing parties. However, lacking the partners for cooperation in the party channel, their possibilities to compensate for these disadvantages via IPC are clearly restricted.

**Conclusion**

This paper departed from recent arguments to increase NP powers in EU decision-making through inter-parliamentary cooperation (Maurer 2002, Maurer 2009, Peters *et al.* 2010, Slaughter 2004, pp 104-130). Shifting the focus of analysis from parliaments at large to the parties within the parliaments, it sought to advance the debate by providing a better picture about the amount and the substance of the coordination going on. Especially, the paper looked at differences between parties and how they can be explained, to get a better picture about the possible effect of IPC on power relations in the EU’s national channel of democratic representation.

On the aggregate level, the results of the study on the parties in the Austrian parliament show that Austrian MPs increasingly make use of IPC when dealing with the EU level and that they expect its importance to further increase in the future. Also, they support the argument that neglecting cooperation between parties potentially misses out an important (or even the more important) part of IPC going on today.

Disaggregating the results to the party level shows that indeed the amount of IPC as well as the relevance, MPs attribute to it, is spread unequally across the parliament. Coordination seems to be more important for opposition parties, as it provides them with a way to (a) receive information about what is going on in EU decision-making and (b) to coordinate their interests with other parties and hence to increase the chances that they are heard in the process—two things for which governing parties largely rely on their party colleagues in the government. To make full use of the potential of IPC, however, opposition parties need to ideologically fit into a Europarty and/or an EP party group, as it is mainly between parties belonging to the same party families where fruitful and substantial cooperation is taking place. Overall, the results therefore suggest that IPC may not only enhance NP powers vis-à-vis non-parliamentarian actors, but may also affect power relations within NPs themselves.
What may these results tell us about the future potential of IPC? First, they support arguments made e.g. by Kiiver (2006) and Costa and Latek (2001) that the actual meaning of IPC on the official parliamentary level for most of the meetings is rather low. These meetings mainly fulfil an indirect function as (a) they help to make MPs more aware of the EU level and (b) provide a framework for them to build up trans-European networks with colleagues from other parliaments.

The results also suggest that the likelihood that this situation will change in the future is rather low and IPC in the parliamentary channel might indeed remain an ‘unfulfilled promise’ (Raunio 2009: p.322). One reason for this is probably the heterogeneity of interests between parliaments and MS pointed to by the scholars mentioned above. But also within parliaments, the motivation to change the status of IPC significantly may be limited. Such changes would usually require the support of a majority in the parliaments—normally held by the governing parties. However, first the results suggest that for governing parties IPC seems to be less important. Secondly, it is unclear why the government bloc should agree on changes that might decrease their advantages vis-à-vis the Opposition.

The dominance of party government in European democracies also sheds a critical light on the effect, the Early Warning Mechanism may have on the amount and the substance of IPC in the future. Some scholars have set quite high expectations into this new instrument (e.g. Cooper 2006). Others again expect its effect to be rather limited (e.g. Kiiver 2006, Raunio 2010, Rittberger 2005). Indeed, it will be interesting to see, how often the position of the parliamentary majority (i.e. the governing parties) on a legislative proposal in a country will differ significantly from the position of its government’s representative in the Council, or whether a proposal against which NPs raise a ‘yellow’ or even ‘orange’ card would not have failed to pass the Council anyway.

However, all this does not mean that IPC may not increase further in the future. But if so, this is more likely to happen primarily in the party channel. Not only is interest heterogeneity less of a problem in this channel. Also, the European party federations and the party groups in the EP provide an institutionalised but flexible and still expanding network, on which parties already today can fall back when they feel the need to pool their resources (as the Green group does or it was the case with Austrian Social democrats and the Services directive).
of course means that parties, which do not fit into established party families, face a clear disadvantage. On the other hand, maybe the continuous efforts of the FPÖ to expand its network indeed make the strongest case for the argument that IPC in the party channel will play a more important role in the future.

Two qualifications to these conclusions seem to be indicated. First, this study has examined only five parties in one parliament. As with every small-n study, generalisations from this study to parliaments in general are difficult to make and further research (including more parliaments and parties) is necessary to see whether the results for Austria also hold for parties from other parliaments. Also, such studies would profit from more quantitative data to measure differences between parties more precisely. While the qualitative expert-judgements on which this study is mainly based do detect some significant differences (e.g. between affiliated and non-affiliated parties) and give a good impression about the relative importance of different channels of cooperation for parties, they do not allow (a) to reliably measure smaller differences like within the group of affiliated parties or (b) to deliver a comprehensive picture about the absolute quantitative amount of cooperation that is going on.

Still, the findings do make a strong argument that, at least for some parliaments, neglecting the party-dimension when discussing the potential of IPC delivers only an incomplete picture. Also the causal mechanisms traced for different parties suggest that it might well be worth to investigate differences in IPC between parties on a broader basis.

The second qualification eventually takes this paper back to the general question of IPC’s potential to reduce the EU’s alleged democratic deficit. Indeed, the results suggest that IPC may be a fruitful way for, and is increasingly used by, national parliamentarians to keep better track with processes on the European level. Still, this effect of course is limited to the extent NPs are able and willing to engage in EU decision-making at all.

Research suggests that two of the main burdens for an increased NP engagement in EU matters are (a) the overall scarce resources of national parliamentarians and (b) their limited willingness to spend these scarce resources on EU-issues, which often have only little salience for their voters. As long as these two parameters do not change significantly, the resources national MPs are likely to spend on the EU therefore are bound to be limited.
Hence, investing a larger part of these EU-related resources on IPC may help NPs to use them more efficiently. However, whether IPC is likely to change the general picture remains questionable.

Nevertheless, the Austrian example suggests that, especially when taking into account the interactions in the party channel, at least for some parliaments the amount and the functionality of IPC may be higher than sometimes assumed. This also supports an argument recently developed by Ben Crum and John-Erik Fossum (2009) according to which, when discussing the democratic quality of EU decision-making, it is not sufficient to analyse each parliament in isolation and to then simply aggregate individual parliamentary powers. Rather, one also needs to look at the dynamics and interactions between different parliamentary sites to see how they link together, and whether this in the end results into a representative system that fulfils normative democratic standards.

1 The Early Warning Mechanism gives NPs the right to raise objections against Commission proposals if they think that a proposal is not in line with the Principle of Subsidiarity. If one third of all chambers submit a reasoned opinion, the Commission must review the proposal (‘yellow card’). If a majority does so, the proposal can be voted down immediately by either the Council or the EP (‘orange card’).

2 A third factor that comes to one’s mind is party size. However, this factor might work in both directions. Larger parties may have more resources available for IPC. For small parties, though, sharing resources may be even more important.

3 Of course, relying exclusively on the information provided e.g. by a single minister/ministry may be problematic also for governing parties. For ‘agency problems’ in Council decision-making see Miklin (2009).

4 Due to its small size (only one representative in the second chamber) and its strong regional focus on only one Federal state (Tyrol), the Liste Fritz was not included in the study.

5 Interviews were conducted with the assurance of the anonymity of the interviewee. References therefore follow the system ‘Interview number: Line in transcript’ (e.g. Int99:356). The full transcripts are available on request.

References


Table 1: Seat distribution in the Austrian Parliament in October 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Chamber</th>
<th></th>
<th>Second Chamber</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nationalrat</td>
<td>Bundesrat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPÖ</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31,1%</td>
<td>38,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ÖVP</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27,9%</td>
<td>45,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPÖ</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18,6%</td>
<td>6,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZÖ</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11,5%</td>
<td>4,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10,9%</td>
<td>3,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liste Fritz</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0,0%</td>
<td>1,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>183</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
<td><strong>100,0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100,0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Governing parties

Table 2: Austrian parliamentary parties and their engagement in IPC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SPÖ</th>
<th>ÖVP</th>
<th>FPÖ</th>
<th>BZÖ</th>
<th>Green Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP Group/Europarty</td>
<td>High Increase</td>
<td>High Increase</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation Parl. Channel</td>
<td>High Increase</td>
<td>High Increase</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development over time</td>
<td>High Increase</td>
<td>High Increase</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
<td>Medium¹</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Small parties underrepresented at Inter-parliamentary Committee Meetings due to the rules of the Austrian parliament.
² Values should be interpreted in relation to other parties within the parliament, not in absolute terms.
³ Informative function for the SPO higher when in Opposition between 1999 and 2006.