

THE CAREER PATHS OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN MEPS.

POLITICAL EXPERIENCE AND CAREER AMBITIONS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

András Bíró-Nagy¹

Abstract

This article investigates the career paths of Central European Members of the European Parliament. Based on an analysis of biographies and the results of a quantitative survey about career ambitions with MEPs from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, this paper outlines both the career paths that lead to the European Parliament and the perspectives for a career after the EP mandate. Central European MEPs are more strongly linked to national politics than the MEPs of the EU-15, and they are even more embedded in their countries of origin than the MEPs of the first directly elected EP were in 1979. However, local politics is a much less frequent recruitment base for future MEPs in Central Europe than in the “old” Member States. The political experience and career ambitions of Central European MEPs disprove the popular myth, according to which the European Parliament is essentially a retirement home for politicians who have no future political goals. The majority of Central European MEPs plan further career steps at the European or national levels, and only approximately a third of them can be considered as “European pensioners”.

Keywords: European Union, European Parliament, elite research, career paths, Central European MEPs

¹ Author bio: András Bíró-Nagy is Research Fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre for Social Sciences (MTA TK PTI). He is also Director of Policy Solutions, a Hungarian think-tank and board member of the Hungarian Political Science Association. He holds a PhD in political science from the Corvinus University of Budapest. His publications mainly focus on the politics of the European Union, Euroscepticism, radical right and populism.

Introduction

The European Parliament offers several possible paths in terms of building a successful career.² There are significant differences in how Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) imagine their future careers, and the roles they assign to working in the EP within their career paths. There are career paths which aim for advancement specifically within the European Parliament, while others consider parliamentary work as a stepping stone to other EU institutions. Some view being an MEP as a reward offered after a life in a national legislature, but before retirement. Furthermore, it is possible that politicians use the years in Brussels and Strasbourg to enter (or re-enter) national politics. When looking at the role orientations of MEPs, it is important to understand whether someone is looking at an EU job as a long-term or permanent opportunity. This decision requires MEPs to place themselves and their careers within the European and national political dimensions in the long-term (Scully et al., 2012; Daniel, 2015; Bíró-Nagy, 2016).

The nature of political experience with which a politician pursues a role on the European stage can also have an important influence on the legislative work in the EP, and his or her ambitions later on. The effect of having a background as a national MP, in a government role, as a member of a party's leadership, or in local politics but without national experience can have an impact on the character of the work in the EP. What antecedents lead to the European Parliament and what future prospects are the most attractive ones for an MEP? This study examines these two research questions through the examples offered by the politicians of five Central European countries that accessed to the EU together in 2004: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. In this paper, I refer to those states from the Central European region which acceded to the European Union together 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

² This publication was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

context for the development of political elites, but also the length of time after the 2004 enlargement of the EU. The first two full terms make up enough time to assess how the Central European political elite became Europeanized on a new platform – the European Parliament.

Following an overview of the theoretical framework and the hypotheses linked to the academic literature about political experience and career ambitions in the European Parliament, the political backgrounds with which Central European legislators arrived to the European Parliament during the first decade of EU membership will be examined. National data will be compared with the characteristics of the entire European Parliament in all instances. Then, the characteristic advancement opportunities for MEPs will be discussed. In the fourth section, I will show whether traditional future career paths (“EU career”, “national springboard”, “political retirement home”) are present in Central Europe. Since politicians’ roles are, according to Kaare Strøm (1997: 155), ‘strategies for the use of scarce resources to achieve specific goals’, it is important to place political roles in the EP in light of previous career paths and later ambitions and goals. In the fifth section, the relationships between typical roles of Central European MEPs – national politician, national policymaker, EU politician and EU policymaker (Bíró-Nagy, 2016: 155–163) –, and political background and career plans will be assessed.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

In order to analyze the political experiences of Central European MEPs, a database was prepared about the main characteristics based on the biographies of legislators between 2004 and 2014 (these results are contained in Table 1). With regards to political background, I start with the hypothesis that Central European parliamentarians are more likely to have a previous life in national politics than their counterparts in older member states (H1). The background for this hypothesis is the historical experience of older member states. The greatest ratio of people from a national parliamentary background entering the EP elite was achieved during the first

direct election in 1979 (Corbett et al., 2011). The distance between the two elites in the EU-15 has increased steadily since then, and backgrounds in national parliaments have been less significant for a career in the EP. When it comes to Central European countries, however, it seems logical that the first opportunities should be exploited mostly by national elites. Consequently, it seems realistic that the relationship between national and European elites in Central European countries has been closer in their first two EP cycles than in member states which already had three decades to distinguish to a greater degree between national and European careers. Previous academic work on EP elections in Romania (Gherghina and Chiru, 2010) suggests that political experience at the national level (positions held in the national executive or in the legislature) is indeed one of the most important factors driving the nomination on top list positions for candidates in European elections. A study from the first term after the 2004 enlargement also indicated that MEPs from the 'new member states' might have been new to the EP, but were certainly not 'unschooled virgins' to politics (Bale and Taggart, 2006). Based on 50 interviews with first-time MEPs, Bale and Taggart found that experience in national parliament and national government was more common among the MEPs from the new member states than among the newcomer MEPs of the EU-15 countries.

It is more difficult to discern where MEPs will go than to examine where they come from. The time passed since the EU accession of Central European countries is not a sufficiently long period to offer comprehensive statistics on the effects of EP mandates on later career paths. However, two possibilities are available for examining the EP as a career stage. First, I will review whether there are corresponding examples in the five Central European countries for the career paths that are regarded as typical in the academic literature (Scarrow, 1997; Verzichelli-Edinger, 2005). Then, survey data on Central European MEPs from 2011-2012 will be used, in which career ambitions of MEPs were also investigated (for a detailed methodology and the composition of the database see Bíró-Nagy, 2016: 152–155.). The importance of career ambitions is clear as they tend to influence the legislative activities of MEPs. Geffen (2016) showed that MEPs' career paths explain a substantial degree of variation in the volume and type of activities they engage in the EP. According to Geffen, MEPs interested in developing a career in the EP are more

active, in particular in those areas that fit into their career paths. Høyland et al. (2017) also argued that those who seek to move from the European to the national level, participate less in legislative activities than those who plan to stay at the European level. MEPs carefully adapt their legislative participation to increase their chances of promotion at their preferred level. Høyland et al. (2017) also proved that the individual ambitions on legislative behavior is crucially shaped by the electoral system. In candidate-centred electoral systems, MEPs invest more time in campaigning, while in party-centred systems politicians are more likely to spend more time and energy in legislative activities. Whitaker (2014) highlighted the link between influence and career plans: policy influence and office benefits are associated with lower likelihood of exiting the EP, while being on the geographical periphery of the EU makes MEPs more likely to leave.

Questions regarding career ambitions are more suitable for exploring relationships with role orientations as well, since they show the preferences of MEPs and not what they were eventually able to realize from their goals. It is important to emphasize that the degree to which representatives are able to execute their plans does not only depend on them but also on their parties' performance in the EP elections and intra-party power relations. From this perspective, career ambitions provide a clearer picture of political role perceptions than the tracking of post-EP positions. It is also worthwhile to add that the time period since EU accession does not allow us a test of the successes or failures of various plans, because their outcomes are still up in the air. According to my hypothesis on future career plans, the career paths of Western European MEPs outlined by Scarrow, Verzichelli and Edinger also characterize Central European MEPs, and these can be tied to the typical political roles in the EP. Accordingly, it is untrue that the European Parliament is simply a retirement home for politicians, but it can also be an important stepping stone for entering or re-entering national politics or for a long term European political career (H2). Although it is important to add that besides individual preferences, institutional (electoral system, recruitment procedures, etc.) and party system differences between Central European countries might also influence the extent to which this hypothesis holds, according to my assertion, the majority of Central European MEPs are trying to achieve one of the latter two career goals.

The Road to the European Parliament

The analysis of the biographies of MEPs reveals that the ten years after the 2004 accession saw mainly representatives with rich political experience enter the European Parliament. Data in *Table 1* prove that the ratio of MEPs with experience in national parliaments from the five countries was above average in both EP terms. With the exception of Czech legislators, this is also true for politicians with government experience: the Polish, Hungarian, Slovakian and Slovenian MEPs have participated in government work and operated in the role of minister or state secretary to an above-average degree. From this it can be concluded that in the first two terms Central European MEPs were more likely to be political seniors – that is to say, an MEP who switched to the EU from a distinguished domestic career – than the EU average. These numbers make the conclusions of Ilonszki and Jáger (2006: 223), which were originally only intended for first-cycle Hungarian MEPs, relevant to both representatives from the 2009-2014 term and the Central European region. According to these, a significant portion of the Central European legislators is more connected to national party politics than average MEPs.

Table 1. The political experience of Central European MEPs at the beginning of the 2004-2009 and 2009-2014 terms (as a percentage of their home countries' MEPs)

		National parliamentarian	Previous government role*	Experience in local or regional politics	Reelected MEPs
Czech Republic	2004 - 2009	54.1	12.5	50	–
	2009 - 2014	54.5	13.6	63.6	63.6
Poland	2004 - 2009	50	22.2	33.3	–
	2009 - 2014	62	22	40	40

Hungary	2004 - 2009	54.1	29.2	12.5	–
	2009 - 2014	54.5	27.2	13.6	54.5
Slovakia	2004 - 2009	71.4	28.6	28.6	–
	2009 - 2014	76.9	23.1	38.5	53.8
Slovenia	2004 - 2009	57.1	42.9	42.9	–
	2009 - 2014	71.4	71.4	42.9	42.9
All MEPs	2004 - 2009	39	16	46	54
	2009 - 2014	34	16	47	49

* Ministerial and state secretarial duties were regarded as previous government experience.

Source: Own research, Beauvallet et al. (2013)

In the five Central European countries, experience in national parliaments is still a definitive factor for selection. So much so, that the ratio of those with such backgrounds was much higher in the 2009-2014 term than in the European Parliament's 1979-1984 term (45%), while the significance of national legislative experience in recruiting has diminished considerably since then (Corbett et al., 2011: 55.; Beauvallet et al., 2013: 6). From the starting 45%, the ratio of MEPs with domestic parliamentary experience decreased to 35%. By 1999, it was only 28% (*Table 2*). Furthermore, the 45% figure in 1979 was achieved while the rule allowing dual mandates in national and EU legislatures was still in effect. Central European MEPs arriving in 2004 could not make use of such an opportunity. In 2004, it was thanks to the newly-joined Central European MEPs, 57% of whom had previously been parliamentarians at home, that this indicator jumped up to 39%, while the total

EU average decreased again in 2009 (to 34%) despite the fact that the national parliaments remained important recruiting bases in Central European countries.

The ratio of former national MPs was not under 50% in either of the five Central European nations, and this was true for both terms. A background in national parliament is therefore advantageous in the selection process in the region. This is especially true for Slovakia, where this type of experience is almost indispensable. At the beginning of the 2004-2009 cycle, 71% of Slovakian MEPs were former parliamentarians at home, while at the start of the 2009-2014 cycle this number was 77%. Similarly to their Slovakian counterparts, in the case of Polish and Slovenian MEPs the percentage of national ex-MPs also grew for the second cycle – in Poland from 50 to 62%, and in Slovenia from 57 to 71%. The 2009 Czech and Hungarian teams retained their prior levels in 2009, though these were already high in both places. This meant a ratio well over the EP average (54%).

Table 2. National parliament and government experience among MEPs (1979-2009, percent)

	Experience in national parliaments	Experience in national governance
EP 1979	45	16.7
EP 1984	35	13
EP 1989	26	14.1
EP 1994	30	10.5
EP 1999	28	10.2
EP 2004	39	16
EP 2009	34	16

Source: Verzichelli-Edinger (2005: 269), Beauvallet et al. (2013: 6)

When it came to experience in national governments, only the Czech MEPs (12.5% in 2004 and 13.6% in 2009) lagged behind the EP average (16%). All other Central European countries surpassed this significantly. In the first cycle, three out of seven Slovenian MEPs, and in the second term, five out of seven were previously ministers

or state secretaries. The percentage of Hungarian, Slovakian and Polish MEPs who were previously in cabinet positions also exceeds the average during both periods. Over a quarter of Hungarian MEPs were members of the executive, while this number among Slovaks was 29% in the first cycle and 23% in the second. Every fifth Polish MEPs held an executive position in both cycles.

The wide-spread nature of government experience also indicates that the Central European MEPs who arrived in 2004 were most similar to the first MEPs of 1979, who were deeply embedded in national parliaments. An important distinction, however, is that among the rookies of 2004 this is even more typical. While when considering the entirety of the EP, it appears that the paths to the institution which lead through national politics have become less significant, there is no sign of this in Central Europe according to data from the second term. It is certainly true for all Central European countries that experience in national parliaments or governments did not lose its importance – not even for the 2009-2014 cycle.

Although with regards to the significance of national parliamentary and government positions we can observe that their roles among Central European MEPs are greater than in the EP in general, the situation is reversed when it comes to backgrounds in local and regional politics. *Table 1* shows that only among the Czechs is a previous experience in local politics more common than it is for the EU average. The EP showed great stability in this regard between 2004 and 2014. At the time of the 2004 enlargement, 46% of MEPs had local experience, while five years later 47% did. While on the EU level this did not change significantly, in three out of the five countries (Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia) their percentage grew. Two-thirds of the 2009 Czech MEPs had prior political positions on the local and regional level (in 2004, this number was “only” 50%). The Slovakian and Polish ratio grew from around 30% to about 40%. 43% of Slovenian MEPs (three out of seven) had local experience.

From this data, the most conspicuous fact is that the local connection is almost completely absent among Hungarian MEPs. The 12-13% rate which characterized the local experience of Hungarian MEPs in the first decade after EU accession not

only contrasts sharply with the EU's 46-47% average, but it also differs from regional norms. It is not uncommon to have Central European MEPs who have turned towards the European stage after being mayors, regional leaders or local government officials. In the Hungarian case, the General Assembly of Budapest dominates almost exclusively. In the first two terms, the single Hungarian MEP who held a mayoral position in a city outside of the capital was István Pálfi of the right-wing Fidesz party, who was the deputy mayor of the city of Berettyóújfalu.

The continuity of personnel echoes the EU-15 average among the MEPs of these five countries. 56 of Central European MEPs between 2009 and 2014 (49%) were already in that office in the previous term. This ratio is similar to re-election statistics in the entirety of the EP. Since 1979, there were no significant changes in the ratio of re-elected MEPs. Usually half of MEPs return after elections. The greatest replacement occurred in 1989, when only 42.5% of representatives were retained. The peak was in 1999, when the re-election rate was 53%. There are notable disparities among individual countries when it comes to continuity. Sometimes the ratio can even exceed 70%. In 2004, 79.5% of British MEPs returned to Brussels. Sometimes, however, a complete revamping is in order. In that same year, for example, 17% of Greek and 26% of Swedish MEPs were re-elected (Verzichelli-Edinger, 2005: 264).

It is worthwhile to note that the re-election of an MEP is not only dependent on what position that person was able to acquire within his or her own party. Power dynamics between parties are also very important, and so is the stability or mutability of the party system in a given period. This was especially relevant in periods when 'critical elections' transformed several countries in the Central European region (Evans-Norris, 1999; Róbert-Papp, 2012). If EP elections brought radical changes in parties' support or the composition of parties within a party system, that usually portended or retrospectively confirmed deeper changes which could be detected also in national elections (see for example the changes in the Polish party system after 2005, the trends of the Hungarian party system in 2009-2010, the Slovakian political developments between 2009 and 2012, or the transformation of Czech politics in 2013-2014).

It was thanks to the radical transformation of the power dynamics of the Polish party system that the Poles had the fewest MEPs re-elected in 2009 in the Central European region. With the elimination of the League of Polish Families, the Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland, and other smaller parties, 23 mandates (almost half of all Polish EP mandates) landed immediately in new hands. Additionally, the Civic Platform (PO) was strengthened significantly. Its main opponent, Law and Justice (PiS), similarly saw immense gains. Poland also received four fewer mandates in 2009 than in 2004: 50 instead of 54. Next to such momentous shifts, the 40% re-election rate can still be viewed as high, because it shows that MEPs from parties which were able to send legislators both in 2004 and 2009 were able to keep their seats.

Hungarian MEPs would have also shown greater stability if the Hungarian party system would not have started on a path of radical transformation in 2009, a change which peaked in the critical 2010 general elections. Without the dramatic fall of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), the complete marginalization of the liberals (SZDSZ), and the breakthrough of far-right Jobbik, instead of 54% of MEPs retaining their seats this number could have approached 75% (positions 5 to 10 on the MSZP's EP list featured 4 previous representatives, while István Szent-Iványi of SZDSZ would also have been a returning member if his party would have qualified). The fact that over half of MEPs were still able to stay in the EP also shows that MEPs serving between 2004 and 2009 could hold their own despite the circumstances.

There were no indicators during the EP elections for the Czech party system's transformation, which started in 2010 and saw the appearance of new parties (Spáček, 2013). The Civic Democratic Party (ODS) kept its 9 seats with results over 30%, and six people of their 2004 team stayed on. Though the communists (KSČM) lost two spots, their four remaining MEPs were EP veterans. The Christian and Democratic Union (KDU-CSL) also held onto its two seats. The power dynamics among Czech parties was not dramatic between 2004 and 2009. Most of those MEPs who have already been in office since 2004 intended to keep going and negotiated good

positions for themselves with their parties. As such, it is unsurprising that two-thirds of Czech MEPs were reelected in 2009. This is the highest ratio in the region.

In Slovakia, in a manner similar to the Czech Republic, the party system started to shift in 2010. In two years (and two elections) three new parties made it into the parliament, and three lost their spots (Mesežnikov, 2013). Compared to the notable later changes, the differences between the 2004 and 2009 EP elections were of smaller importance, though they were not insignificant. SMER, a party belonging to the European social-democratic family, almost doubled its strength (it grew from 17 to 32%), and it gained five out of Slovakia's 13 seats. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS), which in the 1990s gave the country prime minister Vladimir Mečiar, already started on a downward spiral and could only retain one of its three MEPs. Over half of Slovakian representatives in 2009 (7 out of 13) could start a second term. The main reason for this was that, despite the changing landscape, all five parties that got into the EP in 2004 kept politicians who represented continuity.

Slovenia only had a total of seven mandates in 2004 as well as in 2009, which meant that even large disparities are barely visible in the eventual outcome of the mandates. The Democratic Party, which won the 2009 EP elections, only performed 9% better than five years before, but it still obtained two mandates – just like in 2004. The Liberal Democrats lost almost 10% when compared to 2004, and as a result they lost one of their two seats. In 2004 four, while in 2009 five parties shared the seven available mandates. None of them received more than two mandates. Finally, three of the seven MEPs were able to get re-elected in 2009.

It can be stated that the relatively great stability among Central European MEPs shows that the region has already developed an elite with European experience. This group sees its career inside European politics in the long run. Due to the existence of career politicians, who view their activities in Brussels as a long-term engagement in rates comparable to the EU average, it can be stated that the 'professionalization' of Central European MEPs has also started (Norris, 1999: 87).

Career perspectives after the European Parliament

One of the most common myths about the European Parliament is that its members are politicians who want nothing else from politics and eagerly await their tranquil years in Brussels with a good salary. Comfortable remuneration can, in all comparisons, be regarded as a fact. Since the 2009 standardization of MEPs' salaries, national differences have disappeared in terms of wages. In addition to the €8,757 base salary, an MEP has a budget of €24,943 to maintain a staff. Furthermore, they receive a daily allowance, as well as reimbursement for travel and general expenses (European Parliament, 2019). Nonetheless, the image of the EP as a political 'retirement home' is not necessarily true due to two factors. On one hand, a mandate in Brussels may be the beginning of an EU career, which can be an antechamber for obtaining political or policy-related prestige, a high-level position within an EP political group, or a leading role in the European Parliament or another EU institution (e.g. EU commissioner). On the other hand, good performance in the European Parliament might serve as a stepping stone for returning into national politics. Experience in the EP can help a politician in reaching a higher level position than the one he or she abandoned or that would have been otherwise available back home.

This tripartite division was sketched out by the much-referenced work of Scarrow (1997) concerning the possible career paths of MEPs. The research, which examined the MEPs of the first three full cycles (1979-1994) from four countries (the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy), pointed out that even in the first terms following the introduction of direct elections a group of MEPs could be identified which saw long-term potential in an EP career.

These 'European careerists' were dedicated parliamentarians who did not view the EP as a chance to 'cool down'. Instead, they were explicitly interested in increasing the prestige of the institution and its relative influence vis-à-vis other European institutions as a career goal. Based on the first three terms, it was fairly simple to

identify the group which used its years in the EP as a gateway to (re)enter national politics. The third group was made up of legislators who considered their time in the EP as the final phase of their professional lives. In their case, this position was awarded as a reward or a consolation prize after a national career. Scarrow identified European careerists and 'European pensioners' in identical quantities (28%-28%) in the four countries, while those who were eying national politics were represented to a lesser degree (16%). Naturally, the three terms were not long enough to determine what specific role being an MEP played in each politician's career. This is shown by Scarrow's inability to place 28% of MEPs in any category.

Scarrow's categories were further elaborated – though with the basic conclusions of the career paths described fortified – by Verzichelli and Edinger (2005). They described the European Parliament as an institution which affords opportunities to both those who wish to excel in the 'political Champions League' and those who endeavor to use the EP as a springboard for re-entry into national politics (Verzichelli-Edinger, 2005: 255) Their study, however, features not only 'stepping-stone politicians' or 'European pensioners' but also a number of other types with a European focus. These can be distinguished according to the nature of the relationship between European careers and national politics, or, more precisely, prior life in national politics. Verzichelli and Edinger differentiate between those who have been tapped specifically for European parliamentary work without a domestic political career (Euro-politicians) and those who start their work in the EP after a significant national career but with a dedication to EU affairs (Euro-experts). This distinction makes categorization more sophisticated in terms of background, and it reinforces what Scarrow sketched out concerning exit paths. Scarrow, Verzichelli and Edinger, and Norris (1999) – the latter writing about prior career paths – all agree that the incremental power gains of the European Parliament initiated the formation of a supranational elite. Simultaneously, Norris regards the appearance and strengthening of a dedicated group of EP career politicians as a requirement for the European Parliament to become a counterweight to the European Commission and national governments. This milieu represents permanence and institutional knowledge, which is extremely important when considering that the EP's future role

is not only determined by its formal powers but also by the ambitions of the politicians who comprise it.

European Careerists, Stepping-Stone Politicians and European Pensioners: Examples from Central Europe

The image of a safe and comfortable escape route was reinforced in Central Europe perhaps by the posting of previously influential politicians. No one could know for sure about these individuals whether they would return to national politics, but public opinion treated them as if they were gone for good. In the case of Hungary, this is how former ministers Magda Kósáné Kovács and László Surján were generally judged in 2004, but the same was true for former foreign minister Kinga Göncz in 2009. They in fact did end their careers in the EP.

Nevertheless, the post-2010 period brought several examples of a return to Hungarian politics and in many cases to high-level positions. Both Presidents of Hungary after 2010 were MEPs beforehand. During his second EP term, Pál Schmitt was the Vice President of the European Parliament. He went on to become speaker of the Hungarian Parliament and, shortly after, head of state. After Schmitt's resignation, his successor also came from Brussels. János Áder, who mainly dealt with environmental affairs in the EP between 2009 and 2012, was tapped by his old friend, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Enikő Győri returned as a state secretary for the Foreign Ministry during the tenure of the second Orbán government, Zsolt Becsey became a state secretary responsible for foreign economic relations in the Ministry of National Economy in 2010, and Béla Glattfelder was made state secretary in the same ministry in 2014. Governmental roles for former MEPs were a new development in Hungarian politics, as administrations between 2004 and 2010 did not recruit a single MEP into Hungarian leadership positions. Still, returnees were not unique to Fidesz. Socialist Gábor Harangozó reverted back to the Hungarian Parliament in 2010, while Zoltán Balczó of Jobbik also exchanged his EP mandate

for a seat in the Hungarian National Assembly – though Balczó went back to the European Parliament for the 2014-2019 term.

There are also numerous Hungarian MEPs who are building a European career: József Szájer, Kinga Gál and András Gyürk – all of them MEPs of Fidesz – are such politicians, they started their fourth EP terms in 2019. Many MSZP MEPs were also operating in the hope of a long-term European career. Zita Gurmai, Edit Herczog and Csaba Tabajdi spent two full terms in the EP (2004-2014), and it was only due to their party's leadership that they were unable to go on for a third stint.

Czech MEPs were characterized by a great amount of permanence in the first ten years after accession. Two-thirds of the 2004 team worked in the EP for a decade. This was upset by the transformation of the Czech party system, which was accompanied by a decline in the popularity of the country's two leading parties, ODS and CSSD. Four of the Czech communist MEPs intended for a long-term European career, and their 2009 delegation consisted only of re-elected legislators. Of these, Miloslav Ransdorf and Jiri Mastalka received the opportunity for a third term in 2014. Jan Zahradil from the right-wing ODS survived the shrinkage of the previous governing party; he even became the *Spitzenkandidat* of his European political group (ECR) after his third term, in the 2019 EP campaign. In addition to long-term careerists, there are those who tasted being an MEP at the end of their careers. The writer Daniel Stroz, the first Czech minister of foreign affairs Josef Zieleniec, or media mogul Vladimir Zelezny belonged to this category. For the Czech, the main trend is for politicians to start their EP work in hope of an enduring European career or as a cool down period. Returning to Czech politics is not typical as of yet: no president, prime minister or minister has come from the MEP pool.

For Polish MEPs, bidirectional movement is much more prevalent. Andrzej Duda went on to become president in May 2015 and ran as an MEP in the campaign. Anna Fotyga left the EP to head the foreign ministry in the Kaczynski administration, though she eventually returned. Rafal Trzaskowski became the Tusk cabinet's minister of administration and digitalization and continued as a state secretary responsible for European affairs under the Kopacz government. Lena Kolarska-

Bobinska also made a political comeback to national politics: she was appointed minister of higher education in both the Tusk and Kopacz administrations after returning to Poland from Brussels. There were plenty of elderly Polish parliamentarians who came to the EP explicitly for a single cycle. Over the age of 65, Jan Kulakowski, Leopold Rutowicz, Janusz Oyszkiewicz, or Marcin Libicki regarded their Brussels mandate as a final stop. Of course, there are many European career politicians in the populous Polish delegation. Jerzy Buzek, Ryszard Czarnecki, Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg, Adam Gierek, Andrzej Grzyb, Bogusław Liberadzki, Jan Olbrycht, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, Czesław Siekierski, Janusz Wojciechowski and Tadeusz Zwiefka have all spent three terms in the European Parliament. Danuta Hübner and Janusz Lewandowski are also “European careerists;” in the last decade, they have been EU commissioners and MEPs, and they both returned as representatives for the 2014-2019 term.

Slovakian representatives display a trend similar to their Czech colleagues. In addition to long European careers, several MEPs view their years in Brussels as a final cool down period. Returning to national leadership positions, however, is not typical. Anna Záborská is amongst the three-term MEPs, and she was also able to gain a position as chair of an EP committee. Monika Flášíková Benová, Vladimír Manka, and Miroslav Mikolášik similarly spent their third terms between 2014 and 2019. After two full terms, Edit Bauer closed her career in the EP at the age of 67 in 2014. There are “European pensioners” among the Slovaks as well. Former minister of agriculture Peter Baco and ex-health minister Irena Belohorská joined the European Parliament for a single round, while Árpád Duka-Zólyomi finished his political career after a long stretch in the Slovakian parliament with a hitch in the EP. What was true for the Czechs also held up for the Slovaks: no one was able to return to a ministerial office or a higher posting from the EP.

Slovenians provide examples for all three categories. The small Slovenian contingent had several leading domestic politicians switch to long-term EP careers. Alojz Peterle, Slovenia’s first prime minister after its independence, spent his third term in Brussels between 2014 and 2019. Former foreign affairs minister Ivo Vajgl and Milan Zver, once education and sports minister, were elected to the EP in 2009

and re-elected in 2014. Jelko Kacin who served as defense minister was an MEP for two terms, but the party for which he is a namesake could not provide him with the sufficient amount of votes for a mandate in 2014. Borut Pahor counts as a top-level returnee to the domestic scene, as he became prime minister in 2008 after his stint in the EP, and in 2012 he was elected as the president of Slovenia. Single-cycle politicians also came from Slovenia: Mojca Murko was a foreign affairs journalist for decades, and switched to the EP at the age of 62. She retired five years after. Being an MEP was a similar endeavor for Mihael Brejč; the former Slovenian minister for labour left the European Parliament in 2009 at 62 after one term.

This review, of course, could not be a complete account. Still, it is sufficient as an illustration: the European Parliament offers plenty of career paths to pick from, also in Central Europe. Those who want to – and have continuous support from home – can build multi-term European careers (as Table 4 shows, more than half of the interviewed politicians could imagine themselves as MEPs in 10 years' time as well). Opportunities for a return to national politics are also present (every fourth Central European MEP would be glad to join their national government in the future). The “retirement home” is therefore but one of the possible role orientations (approximately a third of the Central European MEPs planned to retire). There are more chances for the EP to be a real national or European stepping stone. Naturally, one does not have to but can use it as such.

Career Paths and MEPs' Role Orientations

In this section, the relationship between the political experience, career ambitions and political role types of Central European MEPs will be examined. As a previous research has verified, European/national and policy/politics dimensions are suited for the categorization of Central European MEPs (Bíró-Nagy, 2016). 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 MEPs. The dilemma demands 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 ideal-types. Consequently, Central European MEPs can be divided into the following categories: *national politicians*, *EU politicians*, *national policymakers* and *EU policymakers*.

MEPs were assigned to these categories based on responses to the European Parliamentary Research Group's 2010 MEP survey and my own additional field research with MEPs from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. During my interviews, the questionnaire was adopted from the EPRG 2010 survey (Hix et al., 2016). Additional individual research was necessary due to the 2010 EPRG survey's low sample size among Central European legislators. As a result, a database was assembled which included 40% of all Central European MEPs (45 respondents), which, when compared to other EP survey research projects, is a good ratio³. Moreover, the final database offered representative results according to political groups and member states.

Those whose professional lives are characterized by EU-level policy work and placing EU public policy at the top of their agenda belong to the category of 'EU policymakers'. The tools used by a 'national policymaker' are identical to those espoused by EU policymakers (rapporteurship, drafting opinions, submitting amendments), but the focus of their work is completely different. In the European Parliament, a national policymaker is a person whose main goal is the achievement of policy changes favorable to his or her home country: the benchmark of their success is a tangible public policy benefit for their homeland. An 'EU politician' is one who looks at solving the political challenges facing the European Union as a political entity as the centerpiece of his or her agenda. Politics-related matters fit the political profile of this category best, rather than public policy issues. A 'national politician' is a generalist who prioritizes issues which have become, for one reason or another, decisive political issues in his or her state. Those who regard the promotion of national interests as their top priority emphasize political issues in which

³ Julien Navarro's role typology (2008) was completed by interviewing a little over 10% of MEPs. The EPRG's 2010 survey officially reached 36.8% (270 responders), but if we consider the number of those who completed the questionnaire substantively, their access rate was considerably weaker. The left/right or European integrational scales, for example, were only addressed by 24% of all legislators (Scully et al., 2012: 675).

championing such interests is one of their countries' strategic political goals. A 'national politician' mostly uses the more political instruments during his EP work (plenary speeches, motions for resolutions, parliamentary questions, written declarations), and tends to pay much less attention to policy work.

Regarding the links between positions held before life as an MEP and role orientations, the three main results are the following (*Table 3*). First, of the 12 Central European MEPs who have had experience in government, all but one focused on the European level, and most of them were zoomed in on policy. Out of the four MEP role types, EU policymakers are the most likely to have a prior background in the executive.

Table 3. The political experience of Central European MEPs according to role types between 2009 and 2014 (percentage, N=44)

		Leadership position in a party	Representative in national parliament	Government experience	Experience in local and regional politics	Total
National politician	Sample size	2	1	0	2	4
	% among this role type	50	25	0	50*	100
EU politician	Sample size	6	9	4	5	11
	% among this role type	54.5	81.8*	36.4	45.5	100
National policymaker	Sample size	6	7	1	4	13
	% among this role type	46.2	53.8	7.7	30.8	100
EU policymaker	Sample size	7	7	7	4	16
	% among this role type	43.8	43.8	43.8*	25	100
All Central European MEPs	Sample size	21	24	12	15	44
	% among all CE MEPs	47.7	54.5	27.3	34.1	100

Source: Own research, European Parliamentary Research Group 2010 (Hix et al. 2016). Note: *=p<0.1, p-values for Cramer's V association coefficients.

Second, a link can also be shown between local and regional political experience and generalist, politician-type roles. Half of 'National politicians' and 'EU politicians' have local know-how, while for 'National policymakers' and 'EU policymakers' this ratio is only 25-30%. Third, policymaker type MEPs are less likely to have experience in national legislatures than MEPs with a politician's role perception. Among EU politicians, 80% have personal acquaintance with national parliaments. The average in the sample was 54%, though this same ratio among EU policymakers is just 44%. This seems to illustrate that parties bring in "outsiders" for EU specialist work who have cut their teeth in a specific field outside of their home countries' legislature.

Research data concerning future career plans also confirm the differentiation between European and national representative foci (*Table 4*). Nationally-focused Central European MEPs are less keen to continue with EP work ten years down the line than EU politicians or EU policymakers. 60% of the latter could see themselves as MEPs even after a decade, while representatives with a focus on the national level, this indicator is below-average – only 41%.

A return into national politics, though, is not at all attractive to MEPs with an EU focus. The best evidence of this is the unpopularity of seats in national parliaments: only one EU-focused MEP out of the 28 said they could see themselves as a domestic MP in ten years. Additionally, not one EU policymaker desired such a prospect. Even many nationally-oriented legislators imagine their future in the EP instead of their states' legislatures, although a quarter could (also) see the latter as a viable option. Being a member of a national government, nonetheless, was a more attractive eventuality. This indicates that while many would see a ministerial or state secretarial position as a step forward after the EP mandate, a seat in the national parliament is not necessarily regarded similarly. Membership in the executive motivates Central European MEPs with a national focus to an above-average degree, while EU policymakers are not keen to join the national government either.

Table 4. Political ambitions of Central European MEPs according to role types (N=45, MEPs could mark several answers)

		National politician	EU politician	National policymaker	EU policymaker	Total
MEP	Sample size	2	7	5	10	24
	% among this typology	50	63.6	38.5	58.8	53.3
President of an EP committee	Sample size	0	4	6	5	15
	% among this typology	0	36.4	46.2	29.4	33.3
Head of an EP political group	Sample size	0	0	1	1	2
	% among this typology	0	0	7.7	5.9	4.4
Member of a national parliament	Sample size	2	1	2	0	5
	% among this typology	50**	9.1**	15.4	0**	11.1
Member of a national government	Sample size	2	2	5	2	11
	% among this typology	50	18.2	38.5	11.8**	24.4
EU commissioner	Sample size	1	1	2	2	6
	% among this typology	25	9.1	15.4	11.8	13.3
Retirement from public life	Sample size	2	6	3	5	16
	% among this typology	50	54.5	23.1*	29.4	35.6
Other	Sample size	1	0	4	2	7
	% among this typology	25	0	30.8	11.8	15.6

Source: Own research, EPRG 2010 (Hix et al. 2016). Original question: What would you like to be doing 10 years from now? (Tick as many boxes as you wish.). Note: *= $p < 0.1$, **= $p < 0.05$, p-values for Cramer's V association coefficients.

It is clear from the data that leading an EP committee in ten years is an attractive option for many. 11 of the 30 policymakers could see themselves in a leadership position in their respective fields of expertise. Not surprisingly, none of the national politicians are interested in such an outcome, while among EU politicians interest in this department is average. Committee president is, for many, a more obtainable and realistic position than EU commissioner. While only a third of MEPs marked the former in the sample pool, the latter was indicated by 6 out of 45 as a role they could imagine themselves fulfilling in ten years. The low value of a seat in a national parliament is shown by the revelation that even the rather bold ambition of becoming a European commissioner is more appealing than the acquisition of a much more easily procurable seat in a domestic legislature.

15% of the sample pool thinks that a non-political future is also a fine possibility. Answers in the “other” category summarize such plans, and these include long-term ambitions in business, academia and local government. Finally, it is worthwhile to note that an assessment of career ambitions relying on direct and new evidence from the MEPs indicates that retirement plans are only applicable for a minority in the European Parliament. A third of Central European representatives said that they will most likely not have an active political role in ten years. Those MEPs with a ‘national policymaker’ profile are less likely to consider the EP as a political retirement home than the other ideal-types.

Conclusion

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 the EU-15 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 after 2004. 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 government 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 the Central European 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. This is an important difference between the political backgrounds of the EU-15 MEPs and the Central European MEPs, and it certainly needs further research to establish the reasons behind the relative weakness of local politics as a recruitment channel to the European Parliament in Central Europe.

The career paths and future career plans of Central European MEPs have confuted the myth of the European Parliament as a political retirement home. The formation of a supranational elite, a process mentioned in the academic 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 bidirectional movement is not self-evident in some places. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there have been no politicians who have re-entered 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 and János Áder) and state secretaries (Enikő Győri, Béla Glattfelder and Zsolt 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 and Rafal Trzaskowski). The research conducted

among Central European MEPs also showed that politicians running their cool down lap are a minority. This is in line with Whitaker's (2014: 1517) findings who – based on the analysis of the careers of MEPs over 30 years – showed that fewer politicians view the EP as a retirement home, and more consider it either as a career in itself or a stepping stone to a national career. 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.

The data presented in this paper proves that career choices are central to understand the functioning of representative democracy in a multilevel context, since political experience and career ambitions are reflected in the role types that MEPs apply as well. Political role orientations, career paths and career ambitions offer a few interesting conclusions. Government experience – of which Central European MEPs have a lot – facilitates a European focus and is explicitly characteristic of 'EU policymakers'. 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 policymaker profile tend to have less of a national parliament background. This shows that for policy specialist 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 the future plans of MEPs as well. From these possible plans, the unpopularity of national parliamentary mandates among Central European representatives 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 shunned 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 bring 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 future mobility, the

office of committee chair must be distinguished, which is a relatively popular prospect for EU policymakers. Overall, it can be concluded that the majority of Central European MEPs plan further career steps at the European and national levels, and only approximately a third of them can be considered as “European pensioners”.

A major implication of this study for future research on career paths of MEPs is that it is vital to take into account the ‘stated’ career ambitions. ‘Realized’ career ambitions are not suitable to reveal the true career goals of the MEPs, as they rather show what a politician was able to reach instead of exploring their real career motivations. As we still only have limited information about how political ambitions play out in multilevel contexts, asking the MEPs themselves about what their career plans are will be a must in any future in-depth research about career paths. The comparison of ‘stated’ and ‘realized’ career goals is a potentially highly intriguing direction of research, which could offer some insights into how effectively the MEPs have been able to reach their career goals both in the EU-15 countries and the member states that joined the EU in or after 2004.

References

- Bale, T. and Taggart, P. (2006). *First-timers yes, virgins no: the roles and backgrounds of new members of the European Parliament*. Brighton: University of Sussex.
- Beauvallet, W. – Lepaux, V. – Michon, S. (2013). Who are the MEPs? A Statistical Analysis of the Backgrounds of Members of European Parliament (2004-2014) and of their Transformations. *Études Européennes*. www.etudes-europeennes.eu - ISSN 2116-1917
- Bíró-Nagy, A. (2016). Central European MEPs and their roles. Behavioral strategies in the European Parliament. *World Political Science* 12(1), pp. 147-174.
- Corbett, R., Jacobs, F. B. and Shackleton, M. (2011). *The European Parliament*. 8th Edition, London: John Harper Publishing.

- Daniel, W. T. (2015). *Career behaviour and the European parliament: All roads lead through Brussels?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Parliament (2019). About MEPs. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/hu/about-meps.html> (Accessed 15 June 2019).
- Hix, S., Farrell, D., Scully, R., Whitaker, R. and Zapryanova, G. (2016). *EPRG MEP Survey Dataset: Combined Data 2016 Release*, <https://mepsurvey.eu/data-objects/data/> (Accessed 15 March 2019)
- Evans, G. and Norris, P. (1999). Introduction: Understanding Electoral Change. In: Evans, G. and Norris, P., eds.: *Critical Elections. British Parties and Voters in Long-Term Perspective*. London: SAGE, pp. xix-xl.
- Geffen, R. v. (2016). Impact of career paths on MEPs' activities. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(4), pp.1017-1032.
- Gherghina, S. and Chiru, M. (2010). Practice and payment: Determinants of candidate list position in European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics*, 11(4), pp. 533-552.
- Høyland, B., Hobolt, S. B. and Hix, S. (2017). Career ambitions and legislative participation: the moderating effect of electoral institutions. *British Journal of Political Science*, pp.1-22
- Ilonszki G. - Jáger K. (2006). A magyarországi delegáció az Európai Parlamentben 2004-2006: hasonlóságok és eltérések. In: Hegedűs, I., ed. *A magyarok bemenetele. Tagállamként a bővülő Európai Unióban*, Budapest: DKMKA, pp. 215-238.
- Mesežnikov, G. (2013). Rise and Fall of New Political Parties in Slovakia. In: Mesežnikov, G., Gyárfás, O. and Bútorová, O., eds. ***Alternative Politics? The Rise of New Political Parties in Central Europe***. Bratislava: Institute for Political Affairs, pp. 53-82.
- Navarro, J. (2008). *Parliamentary roles and the problem of rationality: an interpretative sociology of roles in the European Parliament*. Paper presented at "Parliamentary and representative roles in modern legislatures", European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions of Workshops, Rennes, France.

- Norris, P. (1999). Recruitment into the EP. In: Katz, R.S. and Wessels, B., eds. *The European Parliament, the National Parliaments and European Integration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 86-104.
- Róbert, P. and Papp, Zs. (2012). Kritikus választás? Pártos elkötelezettség és szavazói viselkedés a 2010-es országgyűlési választáson. In: Boda, Zs. and Körösnéyi, A., eds., ***Van irány? Trendek a magyar politikában***. Budapest: Új Mandátum Kiadó, pp. 41-63.
- Scarrow, S.E. (1997). Political Career Paths and the European Parliament. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 22: pp. 253-263.
- Scully, R., Hix, S. and Farrell, D. (2012). National or European Parliamentarians? Evidence from a New Survey of the Members of the European Parliament. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*. 50(4), pp. 670-683.
- Spač, P. (2013). New political parties in the Czech Republic: Anti-politics or Mainstream? in Mesežnikov, G., Gyárfásova, O. and Bútorová, O., eds. ***Alternative Politics? The Rise of New Political Parties in Central Europe***. Bratislava: Institute for Political Affairs, pp. 127-148.
- Strøm, K. (1997). Rules, reasons and routines: Legislative roles in parliamentary democracies. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 3(1): 155-174.
- Verzichelli, L. and Edinger, M. (2005). A critical juncture? The 2004 European elections and the making of a supranational elite. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 11(2): 254-274.
- Whitaker, R. (2014) Tenure, turnover and careers in the European Parliament: MEPs as policy-seekers. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(10), pp. 1509-1527.

CALL FOR PAPERS FROM THE ROMANIAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE (POLSCI)

Vol. 19, No. 2 (Winter 2019)

PolSci (Romanian Journal of Political Science) is a bi-annual journal edited by the Romanian Academic Society (RAS). PolSci is indexed by ISI Thomson under the Social Sciences Citation Index and by other prominent institutions such as IPSA, GESIS, EBSCO, CEEOL and ProQuest. Previous PolSci contributors include Francis Fukuyama, Larry Diamond or Philippe Schmitter, as well as a significant number of young researchers. The Journal welcomes academic papers, reviews of recent publications and announcements of forthcoming volumes as well as contributions from various fields of research in the social sciences.

Submissions are now being accepted for the Winter 2019 issue.

Please submit your work saved as a Microsoft Word document at polsci@sar.org.ro before **June 30, 2019, midnight Central European Time**. Please note that we will not review manuscripts that have already been published, are scheduled for publication elsewhere, or have been simultaneously submitted to another journal.

The Romanian Academic Society requires the assignment of [copyright](#). If you are interested in submitting an article, please visit our website for details on the [Authors' Guidelines](#).

Managing Editor

Tel: 0040 212 111 424

E-mail: polsci@sar.org.ro

© 2018 Romanian Academic Society

ISSN 1582-456X