



## Political foundations

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**Dorota Dakowska**

## **POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS**

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While political foundations are little known actors of the European public space, they deserve consideration on several accounts. First, studying them allows us to analyze how European institutions recognize actors that are not among their usual contacts. Then, reflecting on the close ties between these foundations and political parties at the European level enriches knowledge of transnational transfers and networks.

The term “political foundation” comes from the Federal Republic of Germany, where these organizations, funded almost exclusively by public money, have held a highly institutionalized role for over half a century (Dakowska, 2014). The foundations, which have close ties to the political parties represented in the Bundestag, offer “political education” programs to citizens. Operating in around a hundred countries, they take part in the implementation of foreign policy and development aid. Their considerable financial resources depend on how the parties fared in the polls in recent terms and comprehensively amount to over 460 million euros a year. The six foundations currently officially registered in Germany – including the Friedrich Ebert foundation (FES), which is close to the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Konrad Adenauer foundation (KAS), affiliated to the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) and the Heinrich Böll foundation, close to the Green party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) – have offices in Brussels, which enables them to keep up with developments in European politics and expand their networks within the European Parliament and lobby the Commission.

The German example was a source of inspiration in other countries where similar foundations were created with more or less close ties to political parties. Political foundations emerged in several European countries in the wake of the fall of Communist regimes in Central Europe. Several among them have forged ties with the German foundations, such as on the left, the Alfred Mozer Foundation (*Alfred Mozer Stichting*, AMS), which is close to the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) and the *Fundación Pablo Iglesias* in Spain, which is close to the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), whose creation in 1977 was supported by the Friedrich Ebert foundation and by the Socialist International. In France, the Fondation Jean Jaurès, created in 1992 by the socialist party (PS) on the initiative of former Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, was clearly inspired by the German model. On the right, mention can be made of the Eduardo Frei foundation, which is close to the Dutch Christian-Democrat party (CDA), created in 1990 and of the Political Academy of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP).

On the eve of the EU’s enlargement, some of these organizations joined multilateral structures set up by European party federations to coordinate exchanges and offer training to emerging political parties in Central and Eastern Europe. These structures included the Robert Schuman Institute of Budapest, affiliated with the European People’s Party (EPP), founded in 1995. The relations between the Party of European Socialists (PES) and parties from Central and Eastern Europe were entrusted to the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, created in 1993, and largely helmed by social-democrat foundations.

Thanks to their presence in Brussels, the German foundations were able to start campaigning in the 1990s for the official recognition of the political foundation as an organizational form at the EU level. For several years, the Commission had refused to give special attention to these organizations that have extensive national ties and political affiliations. As a result of lobbying to the Commission and the EP and of the support of several influential MEPs, two new structures were successively created, progressively giving institutional recognition to the foundations.

The first new structure is the European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP), created in 2006, which brings together nearly 70 organizations from various European countries. Mostly active in the field of development aid policy, the ENoP has managed to secure European Commission funding. The second initiative, which was the subject of a Regulation adopted in December 2007 (no. 1524/2007) amending Regulation 2004/2003 of 2003 on the regulations governing political parties, was the creation of “political foundations at European level”, i.e., transnational organizations with ties to “political parties at European level”. These new structures were assigned the task of assisting political parties at European level in their activities by producing analyses, participating in debates on European integration, organizing conferences and training sessions and proposing a framework for bringing together national political foundations, researchers and other actors to cooperate at European level. These new foundations included representatives of the political groups of the European Parliament, of transnational parties to which they are linked and of the national foundations affiliated with them. In accordance with the Regulation, the governing bodies of these foundations are supposed to have a “geographically balanced” composition. Yet, the expertise and the resources of the German members have had a prominent influence in the setting up of these organizations (Dakowska, 2011).

In the majority of cases, the first secretary-general to be appointed at the head of a new foundation was a representative of a German foundation. This includes Ernst Stetter, then head of the Brussels office of the Ebert foundation, who was appointed in January 2008 as secretary-general of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), close to the PES, and Claude Weinber, who was simultaneously head of the Brussels office of the Heinrich Böll foundation and secretary-general of the Green European Foundation (GEF), close to the Greens. In March 2014 the Centre for European Studies, which is close to the European People’s Party, was renamed the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in memory of its president, a former Belgian Prime Minister and EPP president (1990-2013), who died in 2013. The members of the executive board of the Martens Centre include the MEP Hans-Gert Pöttering, the former President of the European Parliament and the Chairman of the Adenauer Foundation. The Centre has received over four million euros in funding from the European Parliament in 2013; in the same year the FEPS received over 2.8 million euros. The other political foundations at European level receive between 173 000 and over 1 million euros annually. Thanks to these subsidies, the new European foundations were able to improve their recruitment policies and hire employees with more diverse backgrounds. However, the German “touch” remains undeniable, not only in the launching phase but also in the working methods of these organizations. While these new auxiliaries of the European public space cannot be considered as exact replicas of the German foundations, they have been significantly influenced by the model.

Political foundations are sometimes likened to think tanks insofar as they contribute to public debates, produce syntheses for decision-makers and explain political issues to interested parties. This said, their tasks often go beyond the production and presentation of knowledge. The foundations are closer to the category of the party-based, ideological think tanks that have appeared since the 1970s in the US and UK (Stone, 1996). Like them, they tend to synthesize

and reformulate existing research, associate policy-makers with their events and adjust their products to the expectations of opinion leaders. Yet, while Diane Stone includes ideologically identifiable organizations with known ties to parties in the think tank category, she situates them “outside the public sector” (Stone, 2000, p. 46). In practice this does not apply either to the German political foundations or to those at European level, as they receive public funds and are de facto participating in public policy.

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Wilfried Martens Centre: <http://martenscentre.eu/>

Foundation for European Progressive Studies: <http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/>

**Related entries:** Christian Democrats, Commissioners (EU), Enlargement, Greens, Social Democrats, Think tanks

➔ Networks, political parties

**Index of names:** MARTENS Wilfried, MAUROY Pierre, PÖTTERING Hans-Gert, STETTER Ernst, WEINBER Claude