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## Data, Measures and Methods

# The changing composition of the European parliament: MEPs from 1979 to 2014

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**Abstract** This paper updates data on the EP's composition in light of the latest electoral results. It points to the somewhat contradictory dynamics currently affecting the parliamentary space, and emphasizes the EP's relative stabilization, the emergence of a transnational parliamentary elite and the relative heterogeneity of current processes at work within the institution. In doing so it illustrates the EP's position at the intersection of national political fields. Although the assembly and the MEPs' backgrounds are more stable than previously, this stability affects representatives differently. Our analysis consists in investigating variations according to political group and nationality, two particularly structuring factors in parliamentary space.

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**Keywords:** European elections; members of european parliament; political professionalization; political recruitment; women

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## Introduction

In May 2014, 751 Members of European Parliament (MEPs) from the 28 European Union (EU) Member States were elected at the European Parliament (EP) for the duration of its eighth term (2014–2019).<sup>1</sup> Compared with the seventh term (2009–2014), the division of seats between political groups has changed somewhat: GUE/NGL (from 4.6 to 6.9 per cent), S&D (25.6–25.4 per cent), Greens/ALE (7.4–6.7 per cent), ALDE (10.8–8.9 per cent), EPP (35.8–29.4 per cent), ECR (7.4–9.3 per cent),



EFDD (4–6.4 per cent), non-attached (4.3–6.9 per cent). There are now more representatives from the GUE, ECR and EFDD groups as well as more non-attached, some of whom from various far right parties have since the election managed to form a group at the EP (Europe of Nations and Liberties, ENL). These variations are the consequence of electoral results in the 28 Member States – most notably of the scores of Podemos (GUE) in Spain (5 seats), of the radical left coalition (GUE) in Greece (6 seats), of Die Linke (GUE) in Germany (7 seats), of the conservatives (ECR) and UKIP (EFDD) in the United Kingdom (respectively 21 and 23 seats), as well as of the Rassemblement bleu marine (ENL) in France (24 seats of the country's 74 compared with 3 out of 72 in 2009).

In the wake of these elections, the objective of this article is to update knowledge regarding the backgrounds of MEPs, to question the institution's autonomy and the stabilization of recruitment within its ranks. The analysis of MEPs' backgrounds and of their relative homogeneity not only tells us about who these European representatives are and what they represent in light of European societies, but it also yields insights on the different national political classes, on the major trends that have marked the Parliament's composition since the first universal suffrage vote in 1979; on the ways in which these trends reveal some features and dynamics of the 'field of Eurocracy' (Georgakakis and Rowell, 2013) and of the EU's 'multi-level political field' (Kauppi, 2005).

## **A Survey of the Literature and Presentation of this Research**

Because the EP comprises members of 28 nationalities elected in national votes using different methods (Dompnier, 2011), it is a unique assembly with contrasted dynamics.

On the one hand, the EP's political and national heterogeneity (with several hundreds of national parties represented and 28 countries), the EU's successive enlargements, low turnovers in European elections (45.5 per cent in 2004, 43 per cent in 2009, 42.5 per cent in 2014), its distance from national political centers and lack of recognition by national politicians, journalists and commentators suggest that this Parliament is structurally unstable and very remote from the national political spaces. Appointed through very different electoral processes and dynamics deeply rooted in national political universes (Belot and Pina, 2009), most MEPs have previously held political positions in their states of origin, be it local, national positions or non-elected political positions as political aide or party staffer. As a result, political positionings partly depend on anticipations, trajectories and institutions in and of national political spaces (Meserve *et al*, 2009).

On the other hand, research on the MEPs' careers and backgrounds shows a relative stabilization of their recruitment and a form of growing autonomy of the assembly (Verzichelli and Edinger, 2005; Marrel and Payre, 2006; Beauvallet and



Michon, 2010; Whitaker, 2014). The first studies on British MEPs during the 1980s (Westlake, 1994) and on French (Beauvallet, 2007), German, Italian and UK representatives (Scarow, 1997) tended to nuance if not invalidate the popular widespread perception of the European mandate as a late-career pursuit. These scholars observed that many representatives made careers within the EP and had a lasting involvement there. Writing on the MEPs from countries other than the latest entrants elected in 2004, Verzichelli and Edinger (2005) developed the hypothesis of the emergence of a transnational elite. In their study of sixth term MEPs, Beauvallet and Michon (2010) expanded on this hypothesis by shedding light on the conditions for the emergence of this elite. They showed that the EP's peripheral position in national political fields ultimately makes it unattractive to political elites. This low interest favors a more open recruitment and the election of actors with fewer political resources. As a result, for a significant number of MEPs, this European mandate constitutes an opportunity for acquiring resources and for political professionalization. Indeed, MEPs have several monthly allowances: their salary (8020.53 euros before tax in 2014), the general expenditure allowance (4320 euro as of 2015), the travel expenses allowance, the daily subsistence allowance as well as a staff allowance to hire aides (21 379 euros in 2015). The MEPs thus head small 'political enterprises' comprising on average six parliamentary assistants working at the EP or locally in their constituency of election, with significant discrepancies between staffs in different countries due to variations in labor costs within the EU (Michon, 2014). The emergence of a supranational parliamentary elite has also been confirmed by Whitaker (2014) who, based on a diachronic analysis, showed that the EP has become more attractive to those looking to pursue a legislative career. Studies on parliamentary careers (Whitaker, 2014), on the distribution of the main leadership positions (Beauvallet and Michon, 2010) and on institutional logics (Hix and Høyland, 2013), have further demonstrated that the EP is very much a part of the dynamics that characterize the European political space.

This article updates data on the EP's composition. It points to the somewhat contradictory dynamics currently affecting the parliamentary space, and emphasizes the EP's stabilization, the emergence of a transnational parliamentary elite, and the relative heterogeneity of current processes at work within the institution. In doing so it illustrates the EP's position as a 'boundary' or 'liminal' space (Turner, 1990) at the intersection of national political fields. First, the validity of the hypothesis of a stabilization in the recruitment of European political field will be verified based on the study of MEPs from the latest two terms: the seventh (2009–2014) and the eighth (2014–2019). Second, this observation will be nuanced and refined as the relative homogeneity of the parliamentary space is demonstrated. Although the assembly and the MEPs' backgrounds are more stable than previously, this stability affects representatives differently. Our analysis consists in investigating variations according to political group and nationality, two particularly structuring factors in parliamentary space. The article successively studies stability in light of MEPs'



turnover (I), political experience (II) and socio-demographic backgrounds (III) during several terms, with emphasis on political group and nationality.

## Data

The analysis is based on quantitative data drawing on the biographies of MEPs in the first (1979–1984), sixth (2004–2009), seventh (2009–2014) and eighth terms (2014–2019), using the EP's website 'Your MEPs' section and biographical dictionaries'.<sup>2</sup> Indicators include socio-demographic background (gender, age, level and type of degree), dispositions for internationalization (degrees obtained abroad), political trajectory (types of mandates, career features), professional careers (former profession). Given the strategies of self-presentation used for part of this data, information was double-checked, notably via Internet (personal websites or blogs, sites of parties and political groups, of other local and national assemblies, unofficial sources including Wikipedia and press sources). Listings of all MEPs elected since the first term in 1979 ( $N = 3593$ ) were also extracted from the EP's website. They were merged into a single database and used to analyze turnover rate between terms and the seniority of MEPs.

## I. The Relative Stability of the EP's Membership

The first step in this analysis consists in testing the hypothesis of a stabilization of the assembly by studying the turnover and longevity of MEPs and investigating their backgrounds with special emphasis on political group and nationality.

The turnover rate, the share of new entrants and the percentage of returning members are indicators of the composition of an assembly – often the latest elected in comparison with the preceding one(s) – used to assess its structural balances as well as forms of continuity or variability within it. However, the selection of these indicators is not a self-evident process; it determines the level and nature of the results obtained. Rather than focusing on 'reelected' MEPs, that is, on the 'share of incumbent MEPs among those elected' (Rozenberg, 2014), here we use a reelection rate based on the share of reelected MEPs among the incumbents, as François and Grossman (2011) did with Fifth Republic French MPs. This approach appears better suited to the variable number of MEPs. This number continually increased until the mid-2000s and remains subject to significant variations. For instance, if we consider the seventh term only, there were 736 MEPs in 2009 and 766 incumbents in 2014 following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon and Croatia's accession to the EU. Overall 857 individuals had a seat in the EP between those two dates.

Of the 751 MEPs elected in 2014, barely half (48 per cent) had a seat during the previous term (the seventh), and only 3 per cent were in place during even older



terms. Overall, 42 per cent of the MEPs who held a seat during the seventh term were elected for the eighth term. On the one hand, no difference is observed according to seniority: the reelection rate varies little between MEPs already elected in a previous term and the others: respectively 41.5 and 43 per cent. On the other hand, the reelection rate varies strongly for MEPs who did not have a seat for the entire duration of the term: under one in 10 MEPs who left the assembly during the seventh term were reelected in May 2014; a third of the MEPs who came in during the seventh term were reelected – half of the MEPs who did the full term were reelected. The EP currently includes a quarter of MEPs who had their first seat at the EP in the preceding assembly, 14 per cent in the sixth term, 7 per cent in the fifth term and 5 per cent in the fourth term. Two MEPs even sat in the first term: Elmar Brok (Germany) and Charles Goerens (Luxembourg). There is more turnover in the EP than in most national parliaments: from 30 to 40 per cent at the French *Assemblée Nationale* (François and Grossman, 2011); roughly a third at the Bundestag in 2013 and in the United Kingdom in 2010 (Rozenberg, 2014).

Although it remains comparatively less stable than other parliaments, this instability has decreased since the first terms. Compared with the 1980s, MEPs resign less frequently during the term to occupy another position (26 per cent during the first term, 17 per cent during the sixth and 14 per cent during the seventh). Although the share of new entrants partly relates to the successive enlargements, it has tended to decrease during the latest terms.

Careers at the EP are longer than they used to be: at the beginning of the eighth term, nearly one out of three MEPs were beginning their second term, 14 per cent their third, and one out of 10 had done more than three terms (Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2). On average, the MEPs have sat through 1.9 terms; reelected MEPs have sat in 2.8 terms.

Experience is unequally distributed within the assembly depending on political group and nationality. MEPs from the groups most involved in legislative activities tend to have longer careers in the EP: 2.2 terms on average for EPP MEPs, 2 terms for the Green and ECR representatives, and respectively 1.9 and 1.8 for ALDE and S&D members. MEPs from GUE (1.5), the non-attached (1.5) and those from EFDD are the least experienced. Overall, these groups correspond to the most central parties within national political fields and therefore also the most stable. On the other hand, the MEPs from the Fifteen countries that composed the EU before 2004 (EU-15) are

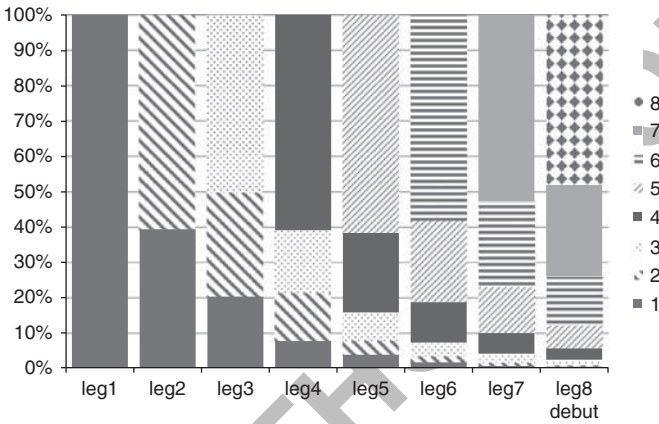
**Table 1:** May 2014 reelection rate of seventh term MEPs (in per cent)

Whole term ( $n = 649$ )	48.7
Left before the end of the term ( $n = 87$ )	8.0
Joined during term ( $n = 121$ )	32.2
Total ( $n = 857$ )	42.2

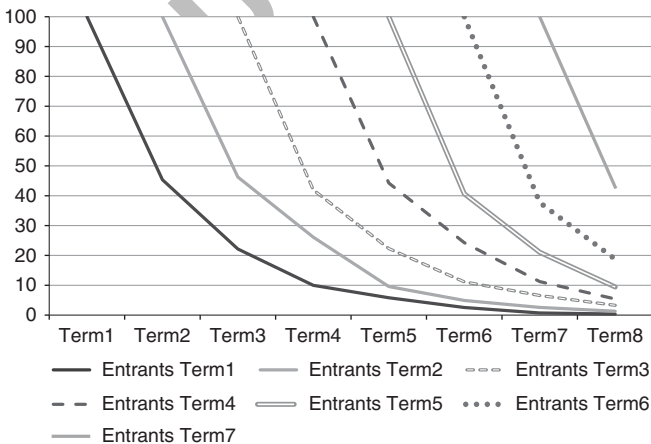


**Table 2:** Evolution of the number of MEPs and of the share of new entrants according to parliamentary term

<i>Year</i>	<i>Term1</i> 1979	<i>Term2</i> 1984	<i>Term3</i> 1989	<i>Term4</i> 1994	<i>Term5</i> 1999	<i>Term6</i> 2004	<i>Term7</i> 2009
Official no. begin term	410	434	518	567	626	732	736
No. of actual MEPs	551	637	606	729	875	944	857
% newly elected	100	60.8	50.3	61.0	61.8	58.2	52.7
% reelected previous term	—	39.2	47.7	37.0	35.8	40.4	45.3
% older	—	0.0	2.0	1.9	2.4	1.5	2.0



**Figure 1:** Composition of assemblies according to term of arrival of MEPs (in per cent).



**Figure 2:** Reelection rate of new entrants by term (in per cent).



the most experienced (2 terms versus 1.7 term for representatives from countries that joined the EU after 2004), particularly those from the older members (Luxembourg (3 terms), Allemagne (2.5 terms) and Belgium (2.3 terms)). Nevertheless, longevity also characterizes representatives from other countries (UK (2.3 terms), Finland (2.2), France (1.9)), including countries that joined in the latest enlargements (Latvia (1.9 term), Poland, Romania, Slovakia (1.8)). MEPs from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic (1.5) and Cyprus (1.3), but also, among EU-15 nations, from the Netherlands (1.6), Italy (1.5) and Greece (1.1) are less experienced. The explanation probably resides in differences of approach to the European mandate in national political space and differences in national political contexts – as in the case of Greece.<sup>3</sup> Although an overall trend towards the relative stabilization of the assembly can be observed, the situation varies according to political group and nationality, and ultimately largely depends on the paces of national politics (Figures 3 and 4).

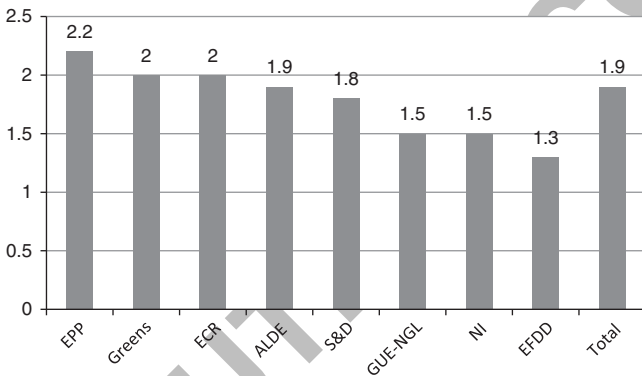


Figure 3: Number of EP terms of eighth term MEPs according to political group.

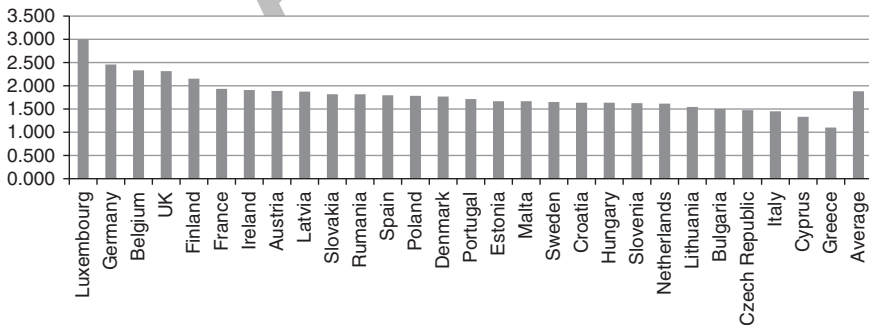


Figure 4: Number of EP terms of eighth term MEPs according to nationality.





## II. The European Parliament: A Place of Political Professionalization

The relative stabilization of the assembly raises the question of the stabilization of MEPs' backgrounds. Studies on the sixth term (Beauvallet and Michon, 2010) show that the EP is increasingly an arena of political professionalization. In addition to updating this finding, this section is concerned with studying its variability within parliamentary space according to nationality and political group.

The image of the institution that prevailed during the first term and to a lesser extent during the second, with many older personalities holding seats following long national careers, has changed considerably.

MEPs no longer combine European and national mandates, and less often combine European and local mandates (respectively 15, 13 and 16 per cent during the sixth, seventh and eighth term).

The share of MEPs with national political experience decreased until the sixth term (47 per cent MEPs had already been members of national parliaments in the first term, 35 per cent in the second, 28 per cent in the fifth) (Corbett *et al*, 2011). Since 2004 it has seen a limited increase (39 per cent in the sixth term, 33.5 per cent in the seventh and 36 per cent in the eighth).

Lastly, those for whom the EP provides access to the political profession and/or upward career mobility have been more numerous in the 1990s and 2000s: often the European mandate is the first mandate of importance after a local mandate (19 per cent in the first term, 25 per cent in the sixth, 27 per cent in the seventh, 24 per cent in the eighth) or its holder's very first mandate (33 per cent in the first term; respectively 35, 34.5 and 38 per cent in the sixth, seventh and eighth terms).

The EP still constitutes a pathway of access to a prominent mandate for non-elected professionals of politics. Eighth term MEPs include 26 per cent of former political aides (parliamentary assistants, members of cabinet of a Minister or European commissioner, permanent staffer in a political organization, and so on) – they were 10 per cent in the first term, 19 per cent in the sixth and 28 per cent in the seventh. There are even 11 per cent of MEPs who have never (or seldom) had a job other than in politics (as aide or elected representative) – up from 10.5 per cent in the seventh term – which illustrates the development of this form of access to the profession of politics, not only for French political elites (Behr and Michon, 2013).

Thanks to their position a growing share of MEPs have access to a full-time paying political activity, often early or halfway into their career rather than later on, as their average age appears to indicate – they are slightly younger than most national MPs (Best and Cotta, 2000), being 51.9 on average as of 1 January 2015 for eighth term MEPs, compared with, for instance, 59.5 for French national MPs in 2012. As in 2009 (average age 51), one in four are under 44 and one in four are over 60. The youngest two MEPs, at 27, are the German Green Theresa Reintke and the Danish ECR group member Anders Vistisen. The oldest MEPs are Greek GUE member



Emmanouil Glezos (92) and Jean-Marie Le Pen (86), who is non-attached. The minimum age required to stand for election is 18 in most Member States, except Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia (21), Romania (23), and Italy and Greece (25). MEPs from the 13 countries that joined the EU in the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements are slightly younger than their EU-15 counterparts. However, their average age is rising, becoming closer to that of the older members: from nearly three years in 2009, the gap between the two populations has dwindled down to one year (currently) (Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 5).

Similarly, the professionalization of MEPs is a finding that warrants nuancing in light of political group and nationality.

First, MEPs from the ALDE and EPP group have the most national experience (respectively 27 per cent and 23 per cent of former government members – respectively 20 per cent and 17 per cent among the S&D and ECR groups, and fewer than 6 per cent in other groups). The European mandate is more often the first mandate for members of EFDD (75 per cent), GUE and the Greens (respectively 54 per cent and 48 per cent) than for members of the EPP (30 per cent), ALDE and S&D (36 per cent).

Second, the European mandate primarily serves as a means of professionalization for MEPs from EU-15: for three in four among them, it is their first major mandate after a local mandate or their very first mandate; this is the case of only one in three representatives of countries that joined the EU during the 2000s. Among EU-15 representatives, this is particularly the case of the MEPs from Greece, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom.

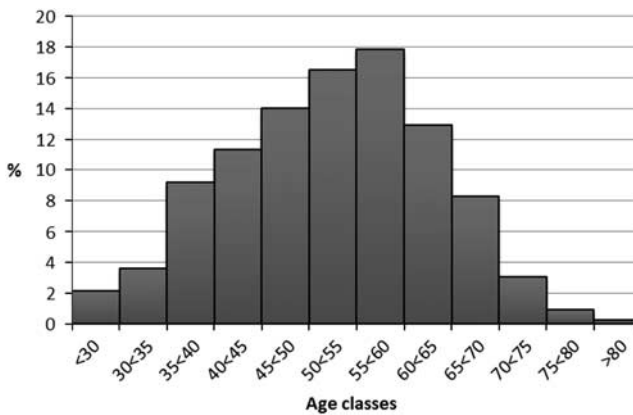
For MEPs from countries that have joined the EU since 2004, their European mandate often follows national experiences in government and parliament: in the eighth term, there are 58 per cent of former national MPs among those from the enlargements of the 2000s, as opposed to only 27 per cent among those from EU-15 nations. In countries from the latest enlargements on the one hand and in the ‘small’ EU-15 states on the other, there is more confusion between European and national than among the ‘bigger’ and older Member States, for which a clearer distinction between European and national trajectory appears to apply. This admittedly results from the lower numbers of individuals concerned in the smaller states, but also from the different positions of the European mandate in national political spaces with closer ties to transnational spaces (Luxembourg being a case in point), as well as from the symbolic and financial appeal of the European mandate in contrast to equivalent national positions in Eastern states; MEPs’ allowances are quite sizeable for MEPs from Member States with lower living standards. The homogeneity of MEPs from countries that joined the EU in the latest enlargements should also be nuanced: on the one hand, representatives from the Baltic countries, Slovakia, Poland and Romania are mostly concerned by a national experience; on the other, Finnish and Danish MEPs have more

**Table 3:** Former political positions of sixth, seventh and eighth term MEPs (in per cent)

	<i>First term (N = 483)</i>	<i>Sixth term as of 1 January 2007 (N = 785)</i>	<i>Seventh term (total, N = 857)</i>	<i>Eighth term as of 1 July 2014 (N = 751)</i>	<i>MEPs from Fifteen during eighth term (as of 1 July 2014) (N = 539)</i>	<i>MEPs from countries of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements (N = 212)</i>
National mandate (National minister and/or MP)	48	41	39	39	28	67.5
Minister	14	16	16	17	8	39
National MP	47	39	33.5	36	27	58
Non-parliamentary local mandate (regional or departmental, mayor, municipal councilor)	42	46	48.5	45	50	32
Regional or departmental councilor	24	25	25	24	29.5	10
Mayor	15	9	9	8	8	7
Municipal councilor	21	31	35	33	37	23
Local mandate+European mandate	25	15	13	16	19	7
Political aide	10	19	28	26	27	24
Member of a ministerial cabinet	NR	15	12	10	8	15
MEP as first mandate	33	35	35	38	42.5	27
MEP as first major mandate following a local mandate	19	25	26	23	30	5.5

**Table 4:** Political experience of MEPs according to political group (in per cent)

	<i>ALDE</i>	<i>EFDD</i>	<i>GUE</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>EPP</i>	<i>S&amp;D</i>	<i>ECR</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>All groups</i>
Member of national government or parliament	49	10	25	27	52	38	44	22	39
Member of government	27	4	6	2	23	20	17	2	17
National MP	45	8	23	27	47	35	43	20	36
Local representative	40	23	37	62	48	46	46	46	45
MEP as first mandate	36	75	54	31	30	36	34	48	38
Political aide	27	15	15	15	29	32	19	34	26

**Figure 5:** Distribution of MEPs according to age group (in per cent).

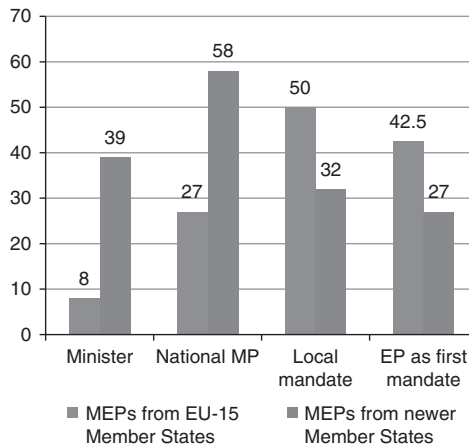
often held prominent national positions than their Czech and Bulgarian counterparts (Table 5 and Figure 6).

### III. Internationalized and Feminized Intellectual Elites

Like political backgrounds, socio-demographic backgrounds have overall remained relatively stable during the most recent terms (see Table 6). The gender balance is however an exception. Although the backgrounds of MEPs tend to reflect observations made about political personnel in general (Best and Cotta, 2000; Gaxie and Godmer, 2007), they stand out due to their educational and international backgrounds, and especially due to feminization. Again, these observations require nuancing according to position within parliamentary space.

**Table 5:** Types of political experience upon first access to the European parliament according to political group and nationality (in per cent)

	<i>MEP as first mandate</i>	<i>MEP after a local mandate</i>	<i>MEP after a national mandate</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Political group</i>				
EFDD	75	15	10	100
GUE-NGL	54	21	25	100
Greens	48	30	22	100
S&D	<b>36</b>	27	38	100
ECR	<b>34</b>	21	44	100
ALDE	<b>33</b>	18	49	100
NI	<b>31</b>	42	27	100
EPP	<b>29</b>	20	52	100
Total	37	24	39	100
<i>Nationality</i>				
Malta	83	0	17	100
Greece	70	0	30	100
UK	58	34	8	100
Netherlands	54	15	31	100
Spain	50	20	30	100
Luxembourg	50	0	50	100
Bulgaria	44	6	50	100
Germany	44	44	13	100
Hungary	41	5	55	100
Sweden	40	25	35	100
Italy	38	27	34	100
Ireland	36	18	45	100
Belgium	33	29	38	100
Austria	33	28	39	100
Portugal	33	14	52	100
Cyprus	33	0	67	100
Rumania	30	6	64	100
Czech Rep.	29	19	52	100
France	27	49	24	100
Slovenia	25	0	75	100
Poland	20	8	73	100
Lithuania	18	9	73	100
Denmark	15	23	62	100
Finland	15	8	77	100
Latvia	13	0	88	100
Estonia	0	17	83	100
Croatia	0	0	100	100
Slovakia	0	0	100	100
Total	37	24	39	100



**Figure 6:** Main positions previously held by MEPs according to country of election (in per cent).

## Education and International Backgrounds

Educational backgrounds are particularly high in the EP. Often holders of degrees in the humanities and in law, MEPs have high levels of educational attainment: more than eight in 10 are higher education graduates; 26.5 per cent have a PhD, a figure that significantly exceeds those observed in the French *Assemblée nationale* (14.5 per cent in 2007) (Costa and Kerrouche, 2007) and government (18 per cent between 1986 and 2013) (Behr and Michon, 2013).

While, like national political elites, most MEPs come from the higher spheres of social space (Hix and Lord, 1997; Norris and Franklin, 1997; Navarro, 2009), those with experience of a scientific occupation or in the media, communication and performing arts sectors (respectively 17 and 10 per cent during the eighth term) are particularly numerous compared with Member States, as for instance in France, be it at the *Assemblée nationale* (respectively 6 and 2 per cent in 2007) (Rouban, 2011) or in government (respectively 8 and 2.5 per cent between 1986 and 2013) (Behr and Michon, 2013). These proportions have remained virtually stable during the latest terms, with variations of 1 per cent at most.

Some of the MEPs are also characterized by internationalized and Europeanized educational and professional trajectories, which is another distinctive feature. Nearly one in five have done all or some of their studies in a country other than their own, and 10 per cent of MEPs have held a position within the European political space. Apart from a few members of interest groups, these are mostly members of European institutions: European Commissioners, members of Commissioners' cabinets, civil servant at the Commission, member of the Committee of Regions, and especially

**Table 6:** Socio-demographic features of sixth, seventh and eighth term MEPs

	<i>First term</i> ( <i>N</i> = 483)	<i>Sixth term</i> ( <i>N</i> = 785)	<i>Seventh term</i> ( <i>N</i> = 857)	<i>Eighth term</i> ( <i>N</i> = 751)	<i>MEPs from EU-15 during eighth term</i> ( <i>as of 1 July 2014</i> ) ( <i>N</i> = 539)	<i>MEPs from countries of the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements</i> ( <i>N</i> = 212)
<i>Sex</i>						
Male	84	69	64.5	63	60	71
Female	16	31	35.5	37	40	29
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Occupation</i>						
Farmer	6	2	2	2	2.5	0.5
Craftsman-Small businessman	3	1	1	1	1	0.5
CEO	6	6	5.5	5	5	6.5
Senior civil servant	7	6	5	3.5	3	4
Scientific occupation	12	18	17.5	17	12.5	29
Secondary education teacher	7	8	7	5	6	2
Media, communication, arts	11	11	10	10	10	10
Self-employed	10	9	8.5	7.5	7	8
Private sector executive	8	12	15	16	15.5	16
Public sector executive	7	5	5	5.5	5.5	6
Intermediary occupation	5	5	5.5	5	6	3
Employee	2	2	2	1.5	1.5	1
Blue-collar worker	3	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Political aide (parliamentary assistant...)	NR	NR	10.5	11	12	8
Not known	13	17	5	9	12	5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Level of educational qualification*

High school or less	NR	2	2	4	5	1
Undergraduate	NR	10	16	13	17	1
Graduate	NR	48	52	44.5	44	46
PhD	19	27	24	26.5	21	41
Not known	—	13	6	12	13	11
Total	—	100	100	100	100	100

*Type of degree*

Law	24	20	22	21	22	18
Political science	9	7	15	16	15	18
Economics	10	14	17	18	17	20
Literature and humanities	18	24	22	21	20	22
Science and technology	12	11	15.5	16	14	22
Health	1	5	5.5	4	3.5	6
Not known	26	18	3	5	5	5

*Studies abroad*

Studied abroad	10	12	18	18	14.5	27.5
Did not study abroad	89	85	80	81	84.5	71
Not known	1	3	2	1	1	1.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100







political aide at the EP (6 per cent) as parliamentary assistant or staffer in a political group. Again, proportions have remained somewhat stable during the latest two terms, but the increase compared with previous terms is significant.

Again, these characteristics are not distributed equally within parliamentary space. On the one hand, MEPs from the EPP, ECR, S&D and GUE groups more often have a PhD than those from other groups. International backgrounds are more frequent among the MEPs from the political groups that play the most central roles in the parliamentary game: 22 per cent among members of ALDE and the Greens, 20 per cent in the EPP, 19 per cent in the PES; only 10 per cent among the non-attached and EFDD representatives. On the other hand, MEPs from countries that joined the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2014 have higher educational qualifications and have more often studied abroad (28.5 per cent, compared with only 12.5 per cent of MEPs from EU-15 nations).

### **Feminization: A Factor of Instability?**

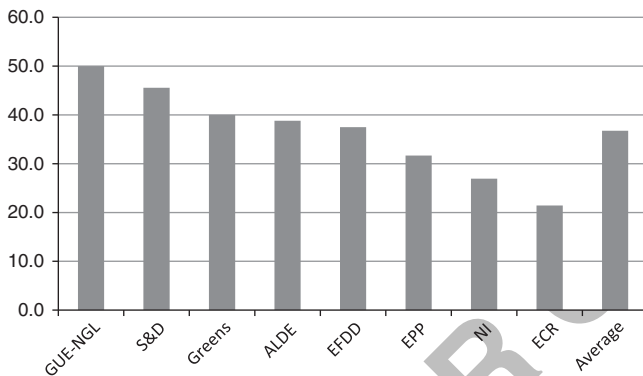
Ultimately the main change observed in MEPs' backgrounds is their feminization. With 37 per cent of women, the EP is more feminized than most national parliaments (25.4 per cent on average in EU countries).<sup>4</sup> While parity is still a long way away, feminization is a major trend: the proportion of women has doubled between the first term and the three most recent ones (16 per cent in 1979, 30 per cent in 1999, 31 per cent in 2004, and 35 per cent in 2009). Yet it is effective in different ways within parliamentary space.

The feminization of the European political personnel was, from its early stages, spurred by left wing parties (Norris and Franklin, 1997; Mather, 2001). There are more women in left-wing groups – 50 per cent in GUE/NGL (European United Left/Nordic Green Left), 45,5 per cent in the PES (Party of the European Socialists), 39 per cent among the Greens-EFA (Greens/European Free Alliance) – than in ALDE (39 per cent), ID (Independence/Democracy) (37.5 per cent), and especially the EPP (European People's Party) (32 per cent), UEN (Union for Europe of the Nations) (21 per cent) and non-attached or ENL (27 per cent). The proportion of female MEPs within the EPP and PES has however seen a 25 per cent increase since 1979. This increase is even higher for members of ALDE (+31 per cent), whose share of women was roughly the same as the EPP's in 1979 but is now comparable to left-wing groups. Regarding the smaller groups, the Greens have since their inception been the most feminized group, with proportions of women exceeding 40-50 per cent in each term. Ultimately, this proportion has been lowest in the latest election, where for the first time they fell behind GUE and PES and became the third most feminized group. The share of women in GUE approached that of PES until 1999. It then saw a sharp decrease in 2004 and 2009 before again increasing in the last election. This fluctuation can however be explained in part by smaller numbers of MEPs.

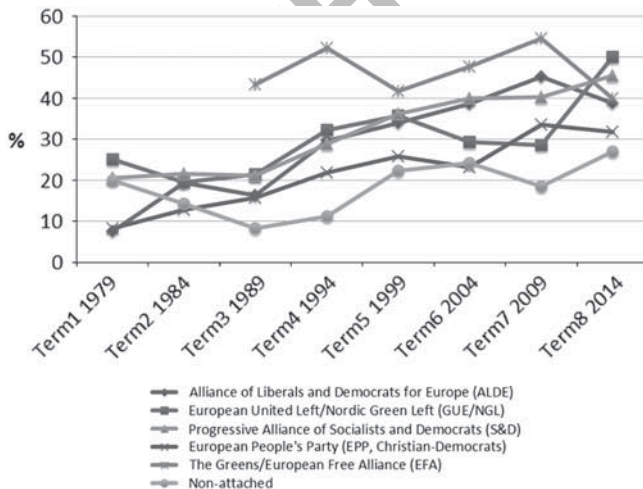


Non-attached MEPs and members of the ENL group are the least feminized since 1989 despite an increase in 2014 (Figures 7 and 8).

The gender balance also varies between countries. The Estonian, Finnish, Irish, Maltese and Swedish delegations are the most feminized (over 50 per cent of women), whereas delegations from Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and



**Figure 7:** Share of women within eighth term political groups (in per cent).



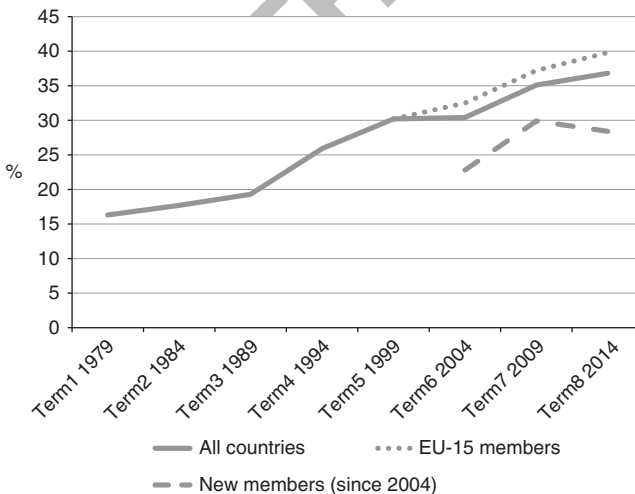
**Figure 8:** Evolution of the share of women within the main political groups present at the EP (in per cent).  
 Source for first to seventh terms: European parliament, DG Communication, Public Opinion Monitoring unit.



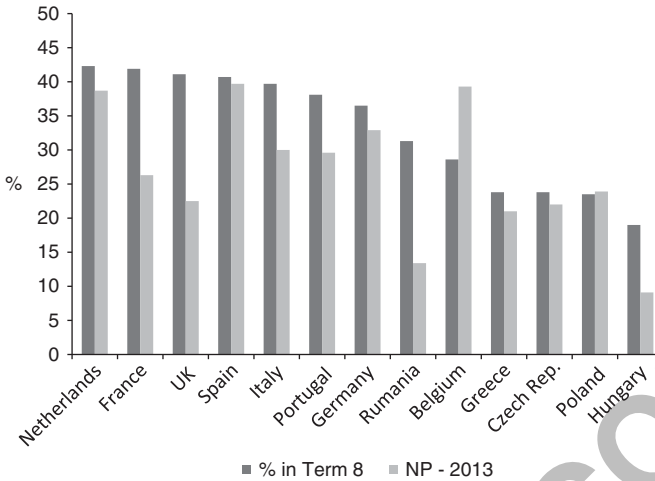
the Czech Republic comprise under 25 per cent of women. The German, Spanish, French and British delegations are in an intermediary position. Overall, MEPs from countries that joined the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2014 are less feminized than those from EU-15 nations (29 per cent of women, compared with 40 per cent for MEPs from the first Fifteen) The evolution of the share of women between the seventh and eighth terms differs between countries. The Dutch and French delegations were already the most feminized; the decrease in their feminization rates (−6 and −5 points) should be seen as relative. The Polish and Czech delegations were for their part already the least feminized. The proportion of women has remained virtually stable (+2 points) within the German, Spanish, Portuguese and Polish delegations. The Italian and British delegations have witnessed a significant increase in feminization (respectively +17 points and +9 points), making them fairly well ranked in the eighth term, unlike in the seventh. Conversely, the feminization rate dropped in the Hungarian (−8 points), Belgian, Greek (−8 points) and Romanian delegations (−6 points) (Figures 9–12).

In contrast with the traditional weakness of female representation in political institutions – barring a few exceptions such as Sweden – the high proportion of women elected in the EP raises questions about the mechanisms of selection and recruitment of MEPs (Beauvallet and Michon, 2013). Do women have different backgrounds? Are they representative of a renewal?

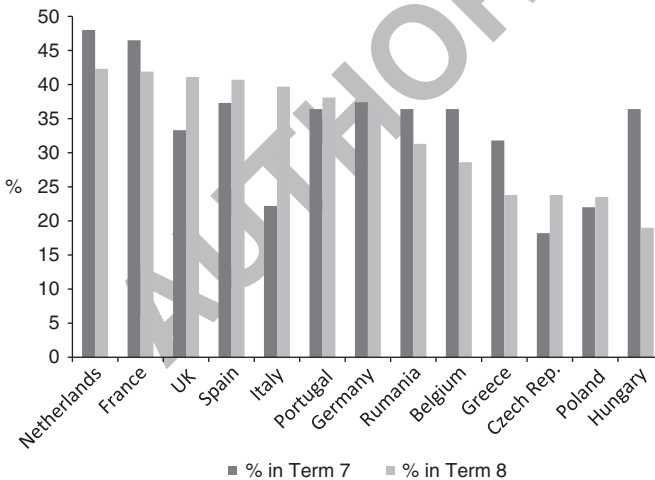
On average female MEPs are slightly younger than their male colleagues (50.8, compared with 52.5 years old); only 20 per cent among them are aged 60 or



**Figure 9:** Evolution of the share of women in the European parliament.

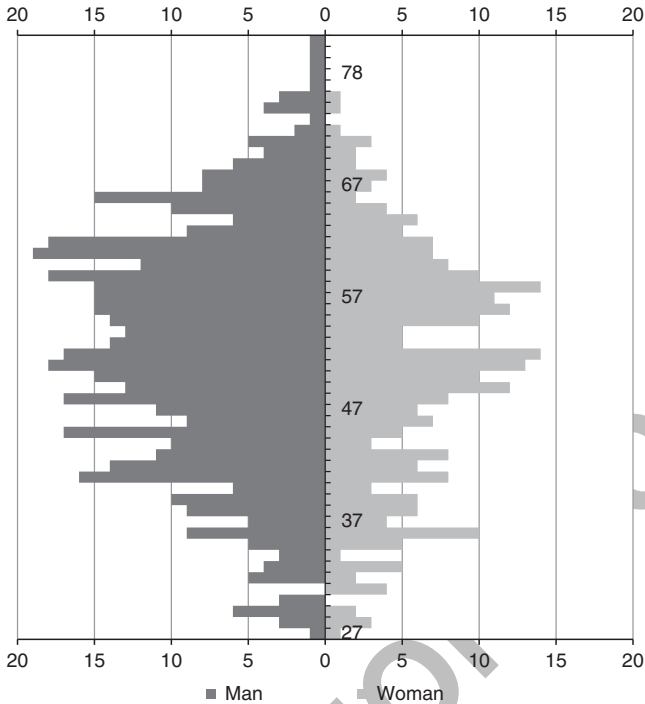


**Figure 10:** Comparison of the share of women at the European parliament and in national parliaments (delegations with at least 20 MEPs, in per cent).



**Figure 11:** Share of women within the 13 delegations with at least 20 MEPs (comparison between seventh and eighth term, in per cent).

over (28 per cent of men). They are also slightly younger upon access to the EP (46.3 years old; 47.9 for men). Political trajectories are divided along gender lines. Upon their entrance in the EP, women’s political careers, national and local, are shorter



**Figure 12:** Age pyramid of eighth term MEPs.

than men's careers (7.3 years after the first mandate upon first access to the EP; 8.4 years for men). Women MEPs have less frequently held a government function (13–19 per cent for their male counterparts), but more experience at local political level (48–43 per cent). Women came to politics more often through positions of political aides (29–24 per cent). The European mandate in itself represents more often an opportunity for political professionalization for women. But this observation does not apply equally. Women MEPs from the countries of the 2004, 2007 and 2014 enlargements distinguish themselves with more experience, including than the men from the pre-2004 members: 25 per cent of women MEPs from the countries of the latest enlargements have been ministers – 10 per cent of women from the pre-2004 members (respectively 45 and 7 per cent for men); 61 per cent have been members of national parliaments – 30 per cent of women MEPs from EU-15 nations (respectively 57 and 25 per cent for men). Although they are endowed with less of the most prestigious political resources than their male counterparts from new member states, they still have more resources than women MEPs from EU-15 nations.

Regarding social background, women MEPs taken as a whole do not distinguish themselves from the national political elites in this respect (Best and Cotta, 2000);



they mostly belong to the upper social tiers. Women are less often corporate executives (2–8 per cent), or practicing a scientific profession (14–22 per cent); they are more frequently political aides (14–11 per cent), employees (2–1 per cent), with an intermediary profession (8–4 per cent). An examination of trajectories and educational properties leads to similar conclusions: female MEPs have less educational resources than their male counterparts. Despite the significant proportion of academic paths (more in political science and the humanities than law, economy, health, science and technology), they have less educational capital than men. They have fewer PhDs (22–29 per cent). But once again, we observe differences between nationalities. Female MEPs from countries of the 2004, 2007 and 2014 enlargements are an exception as they have higher degrees than their female and male counterparts of the EU-15 Member States, as well as than their male counterparts from the new Member States: 33 per cent of the women have PhDs – 19 and 22 per cent of women and men from EU-15 countries, 44 per cent of men from the new Member States.

## Conclusion

Our data confirms the relative stability of the EP and of its members' backgrounds. The EP is less unstable than during its early terms, and careers last longer than previously. This coincides with the relative stabilization of the MEPs' political and social backgrounds, with the exception of the steadily increasing share of women. Overall, MEPs are distinguished by their lower experience in government and national parliaments as well as by the importance of their educational and international background and their feminization.

Finer analysis of the data according to nationality and political group allows us to nuance these findings. These two factors are particularly important in the structure of MEPs' backgrounds and of the European parliamentary space. This illustrates the in-between position of the MEPs, who are turned towards both the national and the European level, torn between a representative posture that they have a hard time embodying on a day-to-day basis (Brack and Costa, 2013) and the constraints of a space whose dominant actors and logics remain essentially bureaucratic (Georgakakis and Rowell, 2013). It also reflects the institutional dynamics of the Parliament and of the European political field as a whole.

Although for some MEPs the European mandate remains a late-career position or even a stopgap before returning to a national position, this appears to be a marginal phenomenon, specific to certain national groups which ultimately represent small fractions in relation to the overall population under study. In effect, the EP primarily serves as a space of access to the political profession, a space of political professionalization for personalities or would-be national representatives whose backgrounds (political or social) are not well adjusted enough to the selection logics that apply for central national positions. If the EP has become a window of



opportunity for actors lacking deep roots in the political field, it is also because prominent political actors have progressively – albeit not entirely – abandoned it, due to the lower legitimacy of the function of MEP in the bigger countries, despite the increasingly significant role played by the Assembly in decision processes – whose effects should however not be overstated (Thomson and Hosli, 2006; Costello and Thomson, 2013).

Overall, the EP is characterized by its recruitment in the *periphery* of national political fields. In this sense, it is primarily a ‘second-order’ assembly: while it does comprise a diverse political personnel, members’ properties remain largely dominated in national political hierarchies. In France, this fragility is very clearly exemplified by the difficulties faced by the most committed incumbent MEPs in surviving the electoral pre-selection mechanisms in which national parties have the upper hand (Lefebvre and Marrel, 2012). This finding is essential to our understanding of which MEPs are in the European field of power: actors whose legitimate political resources have been reinforced but remain particularly *modest*, especially considering the democratic depth of the Parliament itself remains doubtful in light not only of theoretical uncertainties pertaining to the transnational dimension of European political representation but also of ever lower voter turnouts in European elections and of the weakness of the public space in which these elections are set.

Although the uncertainty of these resources stands in contrast with the constitutional status conferred on the EP since 2009 and the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, the combination of the findings presented here sheds light on MEPs’ forms of investment in the ‘field of Eurocracy’. Having limited political resources compared to what is expected in national electoral competitions and social capitals characterized by the relative predominance of cultural and bureaucratic resources, MEPs are predisposed towards forms of ‘goodwill’ in the investment of their political function that are characteristic of the EU. The institutional functioning characteristic of the EP attests to this ascetic brand of goodwill, with on the one hand the permanence of compromise between the Assembly’s main political groups and on the other the very strong dominance of early agreements in ordinary legislative procedure (up to 90 per cent in 2010, Hix and Høyland, 2013). The latter practice has three major implications: first, it has the effect of concentrating decision making in confined arenas such as informal trilogues; second, it contributes to maintaining the role of the expert MEPs as a dominant figure within the institution (Beauvallet and Michon, 2012), much to the benefit of those (including coordinators and rapporteurs) whose central position within the institution depends on this state of affairs (Farrell and Héri-tier, 2004; Keading, 2005; Yoshinaka *et al*, 2010, Rasmussen, 2012, Costello and Thomson, 2013); third, it leads to the partial neutralization (Häge, 2011) of the politicization effect resulting from the generalization of co-decision (or ordinary legislative procedure) in the decision-making process. It is therefore hardly surprising that MEPs have given the impression of being overall collectively absent from the EU’s major debates, especially since 2010 (Vauchez, 2014) and have at least been



invisible to the electorates (Rozenberg, 2009), to political pundits and even to the national political classes, to the extent that the effect of co-decision on the reduction of the EU's democratic deficit has been called into question (Lord, 2013). This is neither a weakness nor a paradox, but an effect of the structural logics of a 'field' situated at the intersection of national political fields (Kauppi, 2005; Georgakakis and Rowell, 2013).

## Notes

- 1 This article received support from the Excellence Initiative of the University of Strasbourg, funded by the French government's Future Investments program.
- 2 Data on the first and sixth terms were entered by Willy Beauvallet and Sébastien Michon. Data on the seventh term was entered by Willy Beauvallet, Victor Lepaux and Sébastien Michon, and subsequently complemented by Gomatee Lahsen thanks to funding by the Strasbourg School of European Studies (University of Strasbourg Project of Excellence). Data on the eighth term was entered by Victor Lepaux and Céline Monicolle, and later complemented by Sébastien Michon.
- 3 Reelection rates vary particularly widely according to nationality: between 0 per cent for Greek and Italian MEPs and over 60 per cent for Germans and Luxembourgers. French MEPs are somewhere in the middle on this, with a reelection rate slightly above 40 per cent (like Poland and Slovenia).
- 4 Source: « Femmes au sein des 27 Parlements nationaux (chambres basses ou uniques) », Fondation Robert Schuman, 26 septembre 2012, [http://www.robert-schuman.eu/doc/femmes\\_en\\_europe.pdf](http://www.robert-schuman.eu/doc/femmes_en_europe.pdf), consulted on 21 November 2012.

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