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POLICY
BRIEF

N°9

How are the interests of local and regional governments represented in the European Parliament?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



A significant share of European Union policies are implemented by local and regional governments, making it crucial to understand how subnational interests are represented in EU decision-making. This policy brief examines the role of the European Parliament in this process.

The analysis shows that, due to its direct democratic legitimacy and open institutional structure, the European Parliament serves as one of the most important channels for the representation of local and regional interests at EU level. MEP activity, committee work, as well as semi-formal and informal forums all contribute to the incorporation of subnational interests into EU policymaking.

The findings suggest that the European Parliament plays a particularly important role in situations where tensions arise between national and subnational levels, as it provides one of the most accessible institutional forums for local and regional actors within the EU system.

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on multiple sources to examine the functioning of the European Parliament and the representation of subnational interests at the European level. The analysis is based on EU legislation and European Parliament documents and semi-structured interviews conducted with Members of the European Parliament, and other EU actors.

The interviews were conducted during the 2019–2024 parliamentary term and provide qualitative insights into how, in addition to formal institutional channels, semi-formal and informal mechanisms facilitate the integration of subnational interests into European parliamentary decision-making.

BACKGROUND

With the advancement of European integration, EU decisions increasingly affect the functioning and responsibilities of local and regional governments. As a substantial share of policy implementation takes place at subnational level, the interests of these actors have become more prominent in EU policymaking.

At the same time, two structural challenges have emerged:

- a **management deficit**, referring to the limited implementation capacity of EU institutions, and
- a **democratic deficit**, referring to the perceived distance between EU decision-making and citizens.

In this context, the European Parliament has become a key actor, as – **co-legislator** in most policy areas – it has a direct influence on EU legislation while also providing democratic legitimacy.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Territorial embeddedness shapes MEP activity

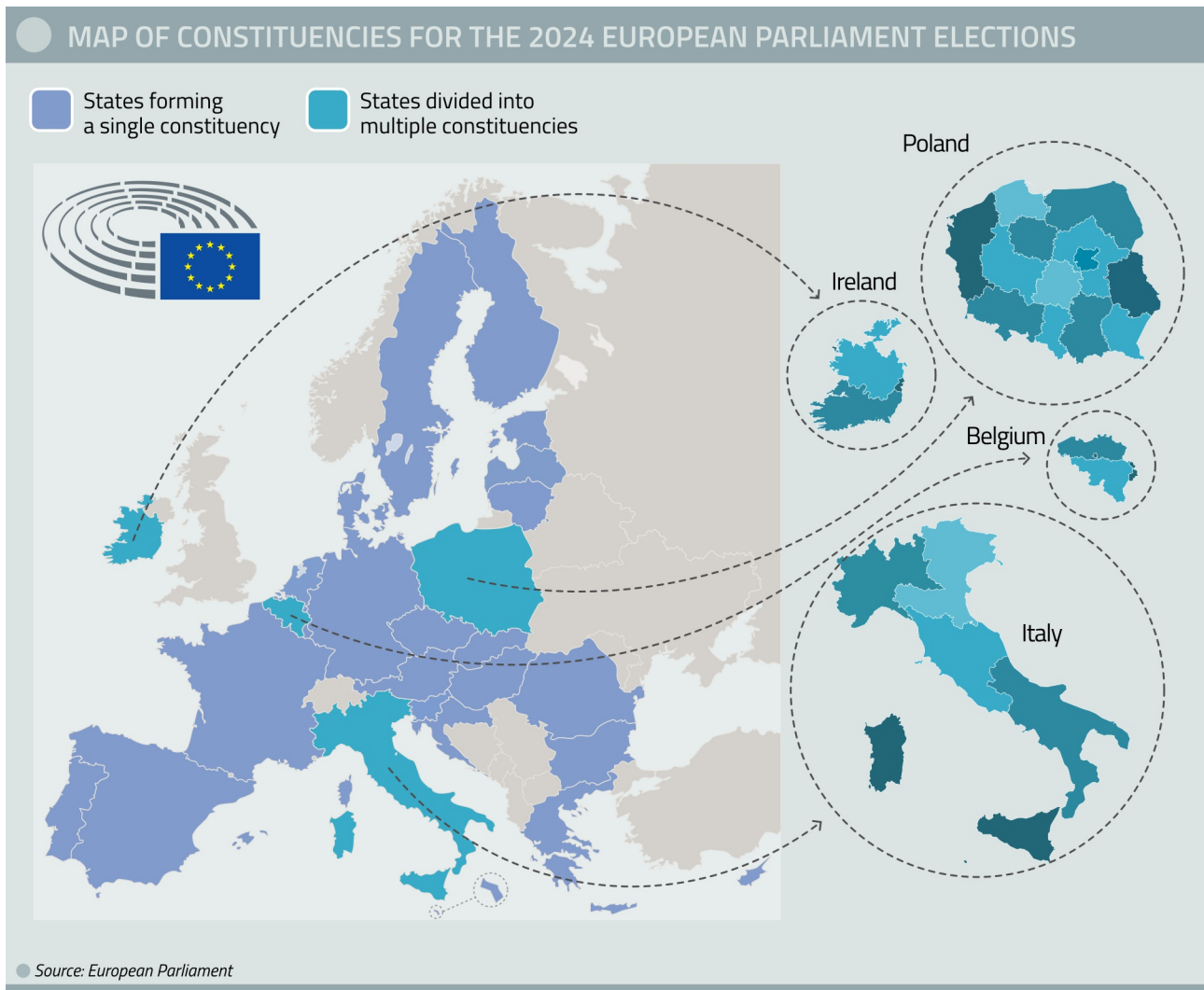
A significant share of Members of the European Parliament frequently address issues related to their constituency or narrower geographical area in their parliamentary work, particularly in written questions.

2. Effects of regional electoral systems

In member states with regional constituencies (Belgium, Poland, Italy, Ireland), MEPs tend to have stronger territorial ties and are therefore more active in representing regional interests in the European Parliament.

3. The impact of dual mandates

Holding a European Parliament mandate alongside local or regional government positions creates additional institutional embeddedness, which further increases the likelihood of local and regional interests being represented.



4. Committees of the EP as key actors in EU law-making

Rapporteurs (MEPs responsible for preparing committee reports on a specific legislative proposal or policy area) and shadow rapporteurs (MEPs appointed by political groups to follow and influence the rapporteur's work, represent their group's position, submit amendments, and participate in negotiating compromise texts) play a decisive role in shaping legislation, making them important channels for representing the interests of local and regional governments.

5. Semi-formal and informal forums as flexible channels of representation

Intergroups (thematic cooperation forums in the European Parliament bringing together MEPs from different political groups) and informal working groups play an important role in policy coordination and in channelling subnational interests into the European Parliament. Interviews indicate that these forums are in regular contact with associations of local and regional governments, making them key channels for interest representation.



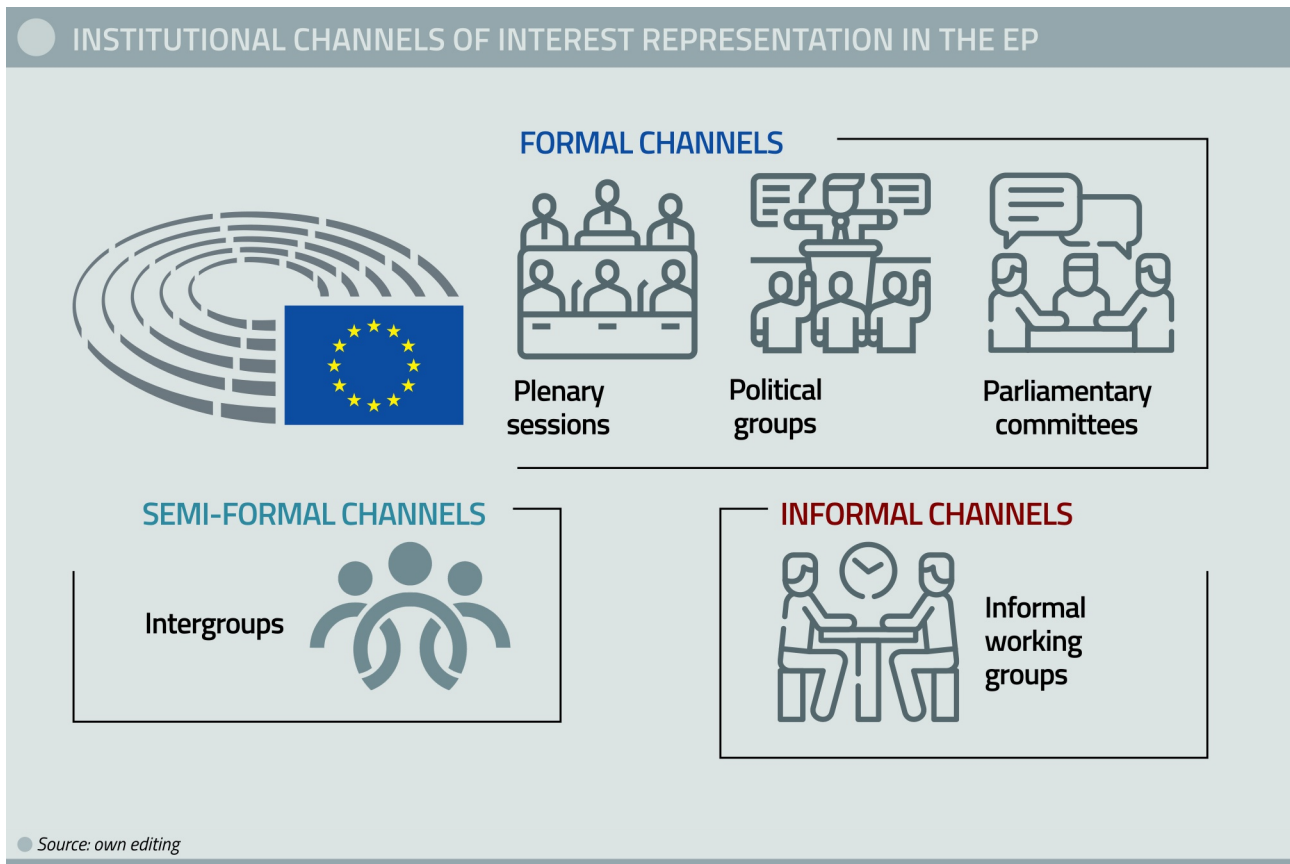
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The European Parliament as a Co-Legislator

- Given that the European Parliament is a co-legislator with the Council of the European Union in most policy areas, it is essential that local and regional governments actively channel their interests into the EP.

2. Cooperation with the European Parliament's Semi-Formal and Informal Bodies

- Alongside formal channels (political groups, committees), semi-formal (intergroups) and informal forums (informal working groups) play a crucial role in representing subnational interests.
- Access to these forums can be facilitated either through direct contact with MEPs or through membership in associations of local and regional governments.



3. Cooperation with Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs in the European Parliament

- In committee work, establishing direct contact with rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs is essential, as they play a key role in shaping legislative proposals.

4. Political and Territorial Considerations in EP Relations

- Cooperation with MEPs should prioritize those connected to the relevant city or region, while taking into account that political affiliation may significantly influence the effectiveness of cooperation.

5. Establishing Regional Electoral Constituencies

- To reduce the distance between citizens and EU decision-making, and in line with a 1998 European Parliament proposal, the creation of regional constituencies in member states with populations above 20 million is recommended. A reduction of this threshold to 10 million should also be considered.
- In designing constituencies, socio-economic characteristics should be taken into account alongside ethnic and geographical factors.

CONCLUSION



The European Parliament is one of the most important institutions for the representation of subnational interests at EU level. Through its democratic legitimacy, institutional openness, and multi-level structure, it acts as a bridge between local and European decision-making.

The combination of formal, semi-formal, and informal channels creates a complex system of interest representation in which local and regional actors can effectively articulate their interests within the EU political space.

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