

# Issue of Loyalty and Voting Tendencies in the European Parliament: The Case of Lithuanian MEPs

Sima Rakutienė<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract<sup>2</sup>:** *This article examines the political cohesion and the issue of loyalty in the European Parliament. The study seeks to compare the loyalty to EP political groups and voting tendencies of different terms of MEPs elected in Lithuania and to contribute to the debate on the work of the representatives of the new EU Members in the European Parliament. The research aims to analyse the loyalty of Lithuanian MEPs to their political group in EP and how loyalty trends change during the second term of re-elected MEPs? Quantitative data show that MEPs are sufficiently loyal to their EP political group, with the exception of Eurosceptic MEPs, and qualitative interview data show that national government priorities, when the need arises, are supported more by members of the ruling political parties than opposition parties. The study also shows that, more often, MEPs' loyalty increases during their second term compared to the first one.*

**Keywords:** *European Parliament, political groups, Lithuania, political cohesion, representation, voting.*

## Introduction

In 2019, the citizens of the European Union elected the European Parliament for the ninth time. At the same time, Lithuanian citizens, like other new EU members that joined the European Union within the "Big Bang" enlargement (2004), elected the European Parliament for the fourth time. Surprisingly, in various surveys, Europeans say they still do not have enough information and knowledge about how the institution works, how and what their elected MEPs in the European Union represent<sup>3</sup>. The recent survey (2020) in Lithuania also confirmed this trend, with the population claiming that they are still lacking knowledge about the work of their elected representatives in the European Parliament<sup>4</sup>.

Lithuania, according to the latest 2021 Eurobarometer survey, remains, as before, among the most optimistic societies in the EU (70% trust the EU), and, together with Portugal (78%) and Ireland (74%), is situated on the list among the three most trusted Member States in 2021<sup>5</sup>. It is therefore worth examining how the representatives of the small and very euro-optimistic new EU members work in the European Parliament and what influences their political choices.

Although there are quite a number of studies on the activities of Members of the European Parliament, most of them have covered aspects of the representation and

<sup>1</sup> Sima Rakutienė is Associate Professor and Senior Researcher, Head of the Department of Regional Studies at the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy of Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania.

E-mail: [sima\\_rakutiene@vdu.lt](mailto:sima_rakutiene@vdu.lt)

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<sup>3</sup> Hix, Simon (2006). *Europos Sąjungos politinė sistema* [The Political System of the European Union]. Eugrimas: Vilnius. p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Rakutienė Sima, Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė Ingrida (2020). Representation of Lithuanian Citizens in the European parliament: between European and national interests. *Politologija*, 98 (2): 69-106, <https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2020.98>.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2021). Standard Eurobarometer 94. Winter 2020 -2021. Public opinion in the European Union. Fieldwork: February-March 2021. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2355> (accessed 19 May 2021)

work of old EU Members' MEPs in the European Parliament<sup>6</sup>. In international studies, the issues of representation and loyalty of MEPs elected in Lithuania or other Baltic states were not given enough attention. Looking at solid international research databases, it was found only a few comparative studies looking for reasons why MEPs in the new Member States are less active compared to "old" Members of the European Parliament<sup>7</sup> or explaining how enlargement in general has affected the performance of the European Parliament in specific areas, such as the environment<sup>8</sup> or women's representation<sup>9</sup>.

A recent (2020) comparative study by Robin Schadler and Jan Gijs Brandsma found that MEPs from EU countries that joined the EU after 2004 are still far less likely to be rapporteurs in the European Parliament than MEPs from "old" MEPs, even though this position is considered very important as they participate in the trilogues, and are negotiating the draft legislation. According to the study, representatives of the "new" EU members in the European Parliament are much more likely to receive less complicated or short files<sup>10</sup>. Other comparative international studies of new member states representation in the EP have focused on the dynamics of the European elections mostly<sup>11</sup>.

The aim of this research is to contribute to the debate on the work of the representatives of the new EU Members in the European Parliament. The article, based on a qualitative study and secondary analysis of quantitative data, first analyses the tendencies of forming EP coalitions, further compares the tendencies of loyalty and voting for MEPs elected in Lithuania by different terms of office. The aim is also to find out how the loyalty of MEPs elected for another term differs from that of the first term.

### **Political representation, cohesion, and loyalty issue in the European Parliament: literature review**

Nearly two decades ago, Simon Hix noted in his research that, according to regular opinion polls, less than 60 percent of citizens know something about the European Parliament and only 5% have an understanding of the real activities of the elected members of the European Parliament<sup>12</sup>. Subsequent surveys, such as the one published by the European Parliament's Research Service in 2016, notes that Europeans distrust (46%) of the European Parliament was higher than trust (40%) in this institution<sup>13</sup>. True, it is worth noting that, according to the same survey, trust in the European Parliament was slightly higher than trust in the European Commission (37%) or the European Central Bank (34%). Looking at the dynamics of opinion polls since 2004 - Europeans expressed the greatest confidence in the European Parliament in 2004 (57% trusted the institution)

<sup>6</sup> Jenichen Anne, Müller Henrike (2014). A social role for churches and cultural demarcation: how German MEPs represent religion in the European Parliament, *Religion, State & Society*, 42(2-3): 148-165, DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2014.932081; Vasilopoulou Sofia, Gattermann, Katjana (2013). Matching policy preferences: the linkage between voters and MEPs, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20 (4), 606-625, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2012.718892.

<sup>7</sup> Schadler Robin, Brandsma Gijs Jan (2020). Some are more equal than others: report allocation to Members of the European Parliament from New Member States. *Journal of Common Market Studies*. 59 (3):697-720 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.vdu.lt:2443/10.1111/jcms.13127>.

<sup>8</sup> Burns Charlotte, Carter Neil, Worsfold Nicholas (2011). Enlargement and the Environment: the changing behaviour of the European parliament. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50 (1): 54-70. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.vdu.lt:2443/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2011.02212.x>.

<sup>9</sup> Stockemer Daniel, Sundstrom Aksel (2019). Women's representation across different generations: a longitudinal analysis of the European Parliament. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57 (4): 823-837. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12848

<sup>10</sup> Schadler Robin, Brandsma Gijs Jan (2021). Some are more equal than others: report allocation to Members of the European Parliament from New Member States. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (3):697-720 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.vdu.lt:2443/10.1111/jcms.13127>.

<sup>11</sup> Farrell David M., Scully Roger (2010). The European Parliament: one parliament, several modes of political representation on the ground? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 17(1): 36-54, DOI: 10.1080/13501760903465173.

<sup>12</sup> Hix, Simon (2006). *Europos Sajungos politinė sistema* [The Political System of the European Union]. Eugrimas: Vilnius. P.119.

<sup>13</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service (2016). Major changes in European public opinion regarding the European Union. Explanatory study. Update November 2016. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/urobarometer/2016/major-changes-in-european-public-opinion-2016/report/en-report-exploratory-study-201611.pdf>. P.21 (accessed 24 May 2021).

and in 2007 (56%) – later EU citizens' confidence in the institution has steadily declined since then<sup>14</sup>.

Many citizens across EU clearly mention the distinctiveness of the European Parliament as the only elected institution of the European Union, which creates direct legitimacy (58% of Europeans mentioned this feature<sup>15</sup>). The European elections are an important channel of representation in the European Union as it builds a more democratic system of political representation. In retrospect, the supranational powers of the European Union have been strengthened and as a consequence- more de jure political competences the European Parliament has acquired in the EU's political decision-making and legislative processes<sup>16</sup>. The aim was to reduce the EU's "democratic deficit" as a supranational decision-making process spread to many EU-regulated policy areas and the veto by member states was used less and less. However, compared to the other channel of national political representation (in the Councils) in the EU, it is not so clear in this case what interests and how the elected Members of the European Parliament represent. On the one hand, they are elected in a particular EU Member State, according to the list of a national political party, and during the election campaign, their programs often reflect national priorities. In the European Parliament, on the other hand, after being elected they join political groups according to ideology, but not the national delegation. In this way, representatives of the same country - elected MEPs - are divided into different political groups and work together with the leadership and colleagues of their EP political group to form a common political program for a particular Eurogroup. Such a process creates a system more like a federation than an international organization. The political architects of the European integration project sought to shape as many common European interests as possible in this way. However, an important question arises: how do MEPs perceive the purpose of their political representation, and do they maintain an important link with the nation state and the national political party after the elections, while already working in the European Parliament? Or do they just become completely loyal to their EP political group?

MEP status is also less clear. On the one hand, MEP enjoys parliamentary immunity and freedom and independence in his/her activities, working for an EU institution that is described as a supranational EU institution alike the European Commission and the European Court of Justice. On the other hand, MEP status is not as distinct from the national influence as from that of, for example, a member of the European Court of Justice and, depending on the MEP's own views – he might identify more with his electorate and his national political party and national interests' representation.

From the perspective of a Member of the European Parliament, he is confronted with various sources of influence in decision-making in his work, at both European and national levels. Physically, MEPs also divide their activities into work in Brussels, Strasbourg and elsewhere, working in the EP's political group, committees, delegations; and working in the nation-state, communicating with voters, usually every Thursday, getting off the plane in their own country<sup>17</sup>.

Given that the European Parliament has become one of the most important EU institutions in EU legislation, having acquired almost symmetrical legislative powers like the EU Council since the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, an important question arises as to who shapes power in the European Parliament and what factors mostly influence MEPs' voting trends.

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<sup>14</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service (2016). *Op. cit.* p.21-22

<sup>15</sup> European Commission (2021). Standard Eurobarometer 94. Winter 2020 -2021. Public opinion in the European Union. Fieldwork: February-March 2021. P. 91-92.

<sup>16</sup> Rakutiene Sima, Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė Ingrida (2020). How do Lithuanian Citizens perceive the European Parliament? EU legitimacy issue and trust in the European Parliament. *Croatian International Relations Review*, 26 (87): 64-85. DOI 10.37173/ cirr.26.87.3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*

Research has already shown that MEPs have sometimes had to choose between MEPs political groups priority or a national governmental priority<sup>18</sup>. Different comparative studies single out a variety of factors - firstly, the national political party, the national government, individual constituents, interest groups and, of course, the position of the European Parliament's political group leadership<sup>19</sup> - which have the greatest influence on MEPs' activities and decisions<sup>20</sup>. The questions arises - Which loyalty do they select?

Research shows that this usually depends on a number of factors: the MEP's relationship with a national political party and whether that political party is in government in the country<sup>21</sup>; whether the MEP plans to pursue a political career in the future and his or her personal approach<sup>22</sup> to the purpose of working in the European Parliament and to EU integration itself. The studies also point out that this is due to a particular political tradition in the European Parliament, which varies from one EU Member State to another. In Lithuania or abroad, there is still no more detailed research on the activities of MEPs and the factors influencing it in the case of Lithuania.

### Methodology and research design

This article focuses on the strategy and methods of qualitative research. Qualitative semi-structured interviews and other data were conducted in the European Parliament in Brussels. The author of this article made an internship at the European Parliamentary Research Service - library and archives in December 2-7, 2019. During the research visit the main interviews with members of the European Parliament (MEPs) elected in Lithuania were organized and conducted, as well as other data from the Parliamentary library archives were collected. Lithuania is represented in the European Parliament by 11 members. During this visit, interviews were collected from 55% of the Lithuanian MEPs of the 9th term European Parliament. Later other interviews<sup>23</sup> were conducted by phone and social media channels during the pandemic period, MEPs from previous terms were contacted. In total it were collected 12 interviews. The author was able to interview representatives of all terms (at least 3 representatives from each term). The most significant were the interviews with parliamentarians who served in the European Parliament for more than one term (V.Blinkevičiūtė - 3 terms, J.V.Paleckis - 2 terms, P.Auštrevičius - 2 terms, B.Ropė - 2 terms), because they could compare the changing environment in the European Parliament, also experienced different situations (presence in national ruling, opposition parties). It is important to mention that interviews were conducted from representatives of different political groups / factions of the European Parliament - European People's Party, Socialists Political Group, the Liberal Alliance, the Greens political group. These major groups - in particular the European People's Party and the Socialists - have had the greatest influence on the EP's political decisions during all the terms of the European Parliament. Interviews with representatives of different political groups in the European Parliament gave a clearer picture of their operating principles, tactics of political control, etc.

Other, but not less important, method involved secondary quantitative data analysis, selecting the data from the VoteWatch.eu – one of the main EU research centres conducting and archiving data about all MEPs activities. Other data and documents

<sup>18</sup> Mühlböck, Monika (2012). „National versus European: Party Control over Members of the European Parliament“, *West European Politics*, 2012, 35 (3): 607-631, DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2012.665743.

<sup>19</sup> Mühlböck Monika (2013). Linking Council and European Parliament? Voting unity of national parties in bicameral EU decision-making, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(4): 571-588, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2012.718889.

<sup>20</sup> Coman Emanuel Emil (2009). Reassessing the influence of Party Groups on individual Members of the European Parliament. *West European Politics* 32 (6): 1099-1117, [doiorg.ezproxy.vdu.lt:2443/10.1080/01402380903230579](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380903230579).

<sup>21</sup> Mühlböck, Monika (2012). „National versus European: Party Control over Members of the European Parliament“, *West European Politics*, 2012, 35(3): 607-631, DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2012.665743.

<sup>22</sup> Vasilopoulou Sofia, Gattermann Katjana (2013). Matching policy preferences: the linkage between voters and MEPs, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(4): 606-625, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2012.718892.

<sup>23</sup> 1 interview with Lithuanian MEP by phone was collected by research colleague Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė.

(reports, speeches) were collected from the main website of the European Parliament.

The study seeks to answer these questions:

Research question - what is the loyalty of Lithuanian MEPs to their political group in EP and how loyalty trends change during their next term of re-elected MEPs?

Previous studies have shown that MEPs face loyalty issues, especially on national issues. In this case, the aim is to find out the loyalty trends in the case of Lithuania and to compare how the loyalty trends change during the second term in different political groups of the EP. Does long-term socialization in the European Parliament have any effect on his/her loyalty?

### **The dynamics of political power in the European Parliament: the formation of coalitions and committees**

As in the national parliament, the newly elected Members of the European Parliament first have to form political groups, to which MEPs join according to their political ideology. The European Parliament has for a long time been forming 7 main political groups, bringing together more than 150 representatives of European parties elected in all EU Member States<sup>24</sup>. According to the European Parliament's internal rules, a political group must have at least 23 members from a quarter (7) of different EU Member States in order to form it<sup>25</sup>. Each Member of the European Parliament may belong to only one political group in the European Parliament and to several committees, delegations, as a principal and as a substitute member.

Who has the political power and influence in the European Parliament? The answer to this question is not that simple. The most influential political groups in the European Parliament are the European People's Party (Conservative-Christian Democrats), the Socialist Democrats and the Liberal Alliance, which often form the "legislative position" of this institution. Historically, no political group alone has ever controlled the European Parliament. Therefore, when analysing the yield of political decisions made by this institution, it is an important issue of forming coalitions. However, unlike national parliaments, the European Parliament does not have a permanent parliamentary majority. In the European Parliament, coalitions vary depending on the specific draft legislation and whether its adoption requires an absolute or simple majority. According to reports from the VoteWatch.eu think tank, MEPs are disciplined and actively participate in plenary sessions. During the eighth term of the European Parliament (2014-2019), the majority of decisions were taken by 657 MEPs (average) out of 751, and only less than 8% decisions were taken with less than 600 MEPs<sup>26</sup>. This means that coalitions between the major political groups in the EP were often formed to pass the law. According to a member of the European Parliament elected in Lithuania for the second term:

„During my first term, the Conservatives <European People's Party> and the Socialists had formed a coalition and they alone had enough votes to elect power by putting it all together. But working here I saw the European Parliament's difference from the national one - that a new majority is formed on every issue. Let's say the Socialists want to propose, for example, improving working conditions, and let's say the EPP and the Liberals are against it - then the Greens are contributing, the Nordic Greens are contributing, somebody else. Or sometimes EPP are looking for someone to support their idea if the socialists do not agree. Then, by supporting others with this idea, they get a promise

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<sup>24</sup> McElroy Gail, Benoit Kenneth. Party groups and policy positions in the European Parliament. *Party Politics*, 13 (1): 5-28. DOI: 10.1177/1354068806068593.

<sup>25</sup> European parliament (2021). The Political Groups of the European Parliament. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/organisation/political-groups> (accessed 15 January 2021)

<sup>26</sup> VoteWatch.eu (2019). Insights, news, policy, politics & institutions. February 12, 2019. VoteWatch.eu data base. <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/ep2019-how-meps-made-decisions-during-these-5-years/> (accessed 15 November 2020)

from them <the European People's Party> that they will also support the ideas of others - there is a certain exchange, such a benefit... ”<sup>27</sup>.

In this way, the coalition is formed on the basis of specific issues - legal acts under consideration. For decades, the legislative position of the European Parliament was governed by a coalition of two major, ideologically diverse, political groups, the European People's Party (right wing) and the European Socialists Democrats (left wing). The coalition between these two political groups - known as the Grand Coalition - has been very common during the last three terms of the EP. During the eighth term of the EP (2014-2019), as many as 74% votes in plenary sessions were supported by the grand coalition, and only in 26 % cases, the European People's Party and the Socialists Group voted differently<sup>28</sup>.

Other EP political groups, the Alliance of Liberals or the Greens, have only recently gained greater political weight and influence in the European Parliament, especially since the last European elections in 2019, when, for the first time in European parliamentarism, a coalition of two major political groups did not manage to form a parliamentary majority - Grand coalition. Analysts say the continued presence of these two traditional and ideologically distinct (left and right) political groups in a joint coalition in the European Parliament has led to a drastic reduction in their seats in the European Parliament since the last election.

The distribution of power in the European Parliament undoubtedly affects the legislative output of the European Union as a whole keeping in mind that in most EU policy areas EP has a symmetrical power to the one of the Council's<sup>29</sup>. Following the 2019 European elections, the number of seats in the European People's Party in the European Parliament's largest political group fell from 29% compared to the 2014 elections to 24 percent (2019), the Socialists Democrats - from 25 percent (2014) to 20 percent (2019). Meanwhile, the number of seats in the Liberal Alliance's political group in the European Parliament has risen from 10% in 2014 to 14 percent in recent elections (2019), the number of seats in the Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance increased by 1 percentage point after this election compared to the previous election.

The number of Eurosceptic political groups in the European Parliament increased by a similar percentage (by 2%) for Conservative reformists and 1% for others (ENF).

As a result of these elections, there has been an increase in fragmentation in the European Parliament in terms of political power and the emergence of certain new traditions. According to a MEP who has also been elected for a second term and is a representative of the Liberals'/Renew Europe political group (which has significantly increased seats in EP), parliamentary traditions will likely change in the future:

„There will be a dispute in each case, because if in the past there was one big group in the European People's Party and another <Socialist Democrats> a little smaller and others very small that you could not count on, now that big <group> has fallen a lot, and others <Liberals> have grown a lot and we need to move to a different way of communicating, to a more sincere dialogue. There can be no decision on the table put saying that you will vote for it tomorrow. Now it must be said why we have to do it, and we are full and equal partners, and here a few dozen members <those numbers> mean nothing anymore and <as a result> some need to climb over ourselves. You know, this political psychology is

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with MEP, GREENS, Brussels, EP, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> VoteWatch.eu (2019). Insights, news, policy, politics & institutions. February 12, 2019. VoteWatch.eu data basis. <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/ep2019-how-meps-made-decisions-during-these-5-years/> (accessed 26 November 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Raunio Tapio, Wiberg Matti (2002). Controlling outcomes: voting power in the European Parliament 1979-2000, *Journal of European integration*, 24 (2): 75-90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036330290024687> (accessed 10 January 2021).

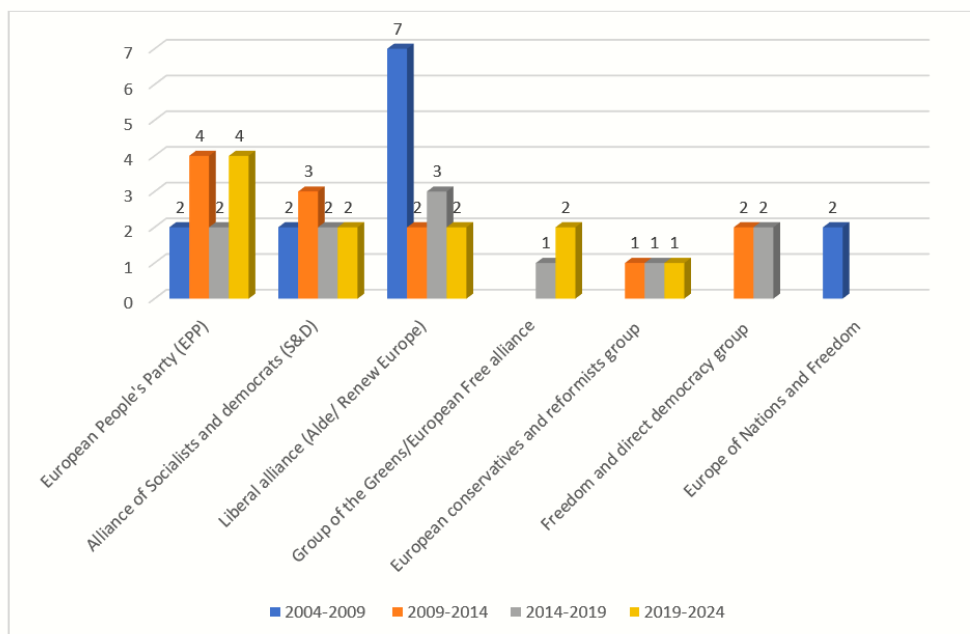
changing not necessarily easily. There is a desire to do it again, as they have done before, but I think some will need to change if they want to see a solid majority in the European Parliament”<sup>30</sup>.

It can be predicted that during the ninth term of the EP (2019-2024), the fragmentation of coalitions will increase and it will take more time to form coalitions.

Each Member of the European Parliament takes a certain negotiating position when deciding which political group to join, as each political group receives quotas for committee posts according to the results of the elections and the established formula, respectively. So each MEP responsibly considers which political group is more useful to him or her.

Analysing the data of all Lithuanian representatives in the European Parliament joining the political groups of the European Parliament (See *Figure 1*), it can be seen that the MEPs elected in Lithuania mostly joined the Liberals’ Political Group (14), the European People’s Party (12) and the Socialist Democrat Group (9)). Thus, Lithuanian representatives usually joined the three major political groups in the EP. Analysing the tendencies of Lithuanian MEPs elected in Lithuania to join the EP political groups, it is noticeable that according to political ideology, Lithuanian Conservatives - representatives of the Homeland Union national political party will always unite the European People’s Party in the European Parliament (V. Landsbergis, L. L. Andrikienė, A. Saudargas, G. Landsbergis, R. Morkūnaitė, A. Kubilius, L. Mažylis, R. Juknevičienė).

**Figure No. 1 Lithuanian MEPs in EP political groups**



Source: Data collected by the author

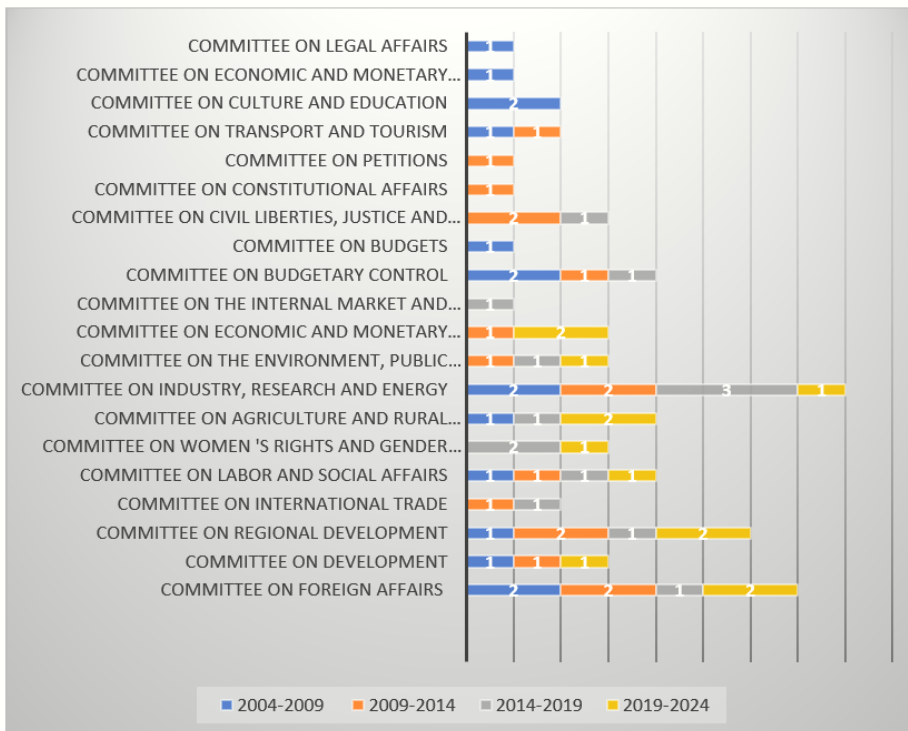
Such a tendency is also characteristic of the representatives of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party in the European Parliament, who joined the political group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialist Democrats in the EP (J.V. Paleckis, A.Sakalas, V.Blinkevičiūtė, Z.Balčytis, J.Olekas). Compared to European trends, when the total

<sup>30</sup> Interview with MEP, ALDE/Renew Europe, Brussels, EP, 2019.

number of these two major EP political groups decreased during the last term, Lithuanian representatives managed to maintain their seats (in the Socialists Group of EP) and the number of Lithuanian representatives in the European People's Party even doubled compared to the previous term. Currently, not only the representatives of the Lithuanian Conservative Party (A.Kubilius, L.Mažylis, R.Juknevičienė), but also the independent candidate A.Maldeikienė have joined the political group of the European People's Party.

Lithuanian representatives in the EP political group of the Liberal Alliance have traditionally united not only representatives of Lithuanian liberal parties (E. Gentvilas, M. Starkevičiūtė, L. Donskis, P. Auštrevičius), but also representatives of ideologically different Lithuanian Labor party (O. Juknevičienė, J. Dičkutė, A.Degutis, D.Budreikaitė, Š.Birutis, V.Uspaskich, J.Vitkauskaitė). Given that the Labour Party has formed coalitions in Lithuanian national politics with representatives of left-wing parties (Lithuanian Social Democratic Party) and does not position itself in Lithuanian politics as a right-wing flank party of political ideology, this choice seems strange, but tendentious. It was the Labour Party that had the largest number of representatives in the European Parliament (5 out of 13) when representing Lithuania for the first time in this institution during the sixth term of the EP (2004-2009). Lithuanian representatives became members of the EP Green Group only during the last two terms of the EP (B.Ropė, S.Jakeliūnas). The number of Eurosceptic Lithuanian representatives in the EP is characterized by dynamics. The percentage of Lithuanian Eurosceptic representatives in the EP ranged from 16% to 10% of the total number of national delegations during different terms. Assessing this in the general European context, when Eurosceptic political groups increased their seats in the European Parliament, the opposite trend took place in Lithuania after 2019 elections - the number of Eurosceptic Lithuanian MEPs has decreased.

**Figure No. 2 Lithuanian MEPs in EP Committees**



Source: Data collected by the author



During the interviews, several MEPs emphasized the importance of their place in a particular committee when choosing political groups, as their area of work was most important to them and even more than ideology determined their chosen political group, but such respondents were in the minority and most Lithuanian MEPs united EP political groups according to political ideology.

„I was invited to join other political groups, but when I asked a question about a post in the Committee on Agriculture - it was then that the Greens said that we guarantee this place for you - this is also such a trade“<sup>31</sup>.

Assessing the tendencies of Lithuanian representatives in the EP to join committees (see *Figure 2* above), we see that they often choose areas that not only better reflect their specialization, their work in the political field, but also areas that can be assessed as very relevant for Lithuanian national priorities – 1. Committee on industry, research and energy (bearing in mind that energy policy has been one of the Lithuania's top national priorities for several decades), 2. Committee on Regional Development (including Structural Funds policy importance for Lithuanian development), 3. Committee on foreign policy (to make a more active contribution to the EU's foreign policy agenda, especially Eastern Partnership that better reflects national priorities) are three top committees chosen mostly by Lithuanian MEPs.

### **Loyalty to European political groups**

The data on the voting of Lithuanian MEPs in plenary sessions are further analysed in order to identify trends of their loyalty to EP political groups.

In the European Parliament, voting in plenary takes place in a number of ways, by secret ballot and by open, roll-call vote. During the interviews, the majority of Lithuanian representatives in the European Parliament said that open voting is important for greater transparency. According to Vote Watch.eu reports, the European Parliament held around 9,000 votes in the eighth term of the EP, most of them by open ballot, which shows how each MEP behaved during the vote. Compared to previous terms, as much as 50 percent during the eighth term open voting has increased and only in a few cases have MEPs chosen to vote by secret ballot, such as the election of the President of the European Commission<sup>32</sup>. On the one hand, the openness of voting data helps to maintain transparency and voters can see what decisions their elected representatives support in the European Parliament, on the other hand, it also helps to maintain control of the EP's political groups towards their members.

The qualitative study, interviewing MEPs elected in Lithuania, sought to find out how their EP political groups control the votes of their members and what shapes the position of the EP political group. The data of the interviews showed that the control of the EP political groups is really important in the votes of their members, and the legislative position of a specific EP political group is formed by its management - the chairman and deputies of the EP political group. MEPs pointed out that voting contrary to the political group's position is not prohibited, but that the political group / group's leadership must be informed in advance in order to be able to predict the outcome of the vote. A member of the Socialist Democrat Group in the EP also explained that during his term of office he had received very clear instructions from the leadership of his political group on how to vote in plenary:

„Before each meeting, each member of the political group receives a bundle of documents

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with MEP, GREENS, 2019, Brussels.

<sup>32</sup> VoteWatch.eu (2019). Insights, news, policy, politics & institutions. February 12, 2019. VoteWatch.eu data base. <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/ep2019-how-meps-made-decisions-during-these-5-years/> (accessed 16 January 2021).

marked with a +, - or 0 for each question. Usually we voted that way, although, of course, there were cases when I thought that the party had made a mistake that it was possible to vote a little differently, but it was mostly personal convictions and not Lithuania's interest. And that there were few such cases that touched Lithuania's interest, as far as I remember. First of all, it was the closure of the Ignalina nuclear power plant and the issue of financing, the issue of Lithuania's accession to the euro area <...>, the financing of agriculture was also of great interest to Lithuania<sup>33</sup>.

A comparison of the responses of MEPs (see *Table 1*) from different political groups shows that it is the leadership of the political group that is very influential in the voting decisions and that it exercises strict control over the overall outcome of the political group. Based on the quantitative data of the European Research Centre *Votewatch.eu*, comparing the data of different terms of office, it can be noticed that the majority of MEPs elected in Lithuania are quite loyal to the leadership of their political group in the European Parliament.

**Table 1. Loyalty of Lithuanian MEPs to EP political groups during voting**

Sixth EP term (2004-2009)	Seventh EP term (2009-2014)	Eighth EP term (2014-2019)
(EPP) L. L. Andrikiienė - 96.46%	(EPP) L. L. Andrikiienė - 96.74%	(EPP) L. L. Andrikiienė - 97.17%
(EPP) V. Landsbergis - 93.51%	(EPP) V. Landsbergis - 95.93%	(EPP) G. Landsbergis - 97.97%
(S&D) J. V. Paleckis - 96.40%	(EPP) R. Morkūnaitė - 96.41%	(EPP) A. Saudargas - 96.54%
(S&D) A. Sakalas - 97.92%	(EPP) A. Saudargas - 97.27%	(S&D) Z. Balčytis - 97.14%
(Alde) Š. Birutis - 94.01%	(S&D) Z. Balčytis - 97.92%	(S&D) V. Blinkevičiūtė - 97.74%
(Alde) D. Budreikaitė - 93.25%	(S&D) V. Blinkevičiūtė - 98.38%	(Alde) P. Auštrevičius - 97.17%
(Alde) A. Degutis - 88.81%	(S&D) J. V. Paleckis - 96.90%	(Alde) A. Guoga - 96.73%
(Alde) J. Dičkutė - 92.33%	(Alde) L. Donskis - 98.10%	(Alde) V. Uspaskich - 90.98%
(Alde) O. Juknevičienė - 95.77%	(Alde) V. Uspaskich - 82.99%	(Greens/EFA) B. Ropė - 97.36%
(Alde) E. Gentvilas - 96.30%	(Alde) J. Vitkauskaitė-Bernard - 86.20%	(ECR) V. Tomaševski - 87.67%
(Alde) M. Starkevičiūtė - 92.24%	(ECR) V. Tomaševski - 86.39%	(EFD) V. Mazuronis - 88.89%
(UEN) G. Didžiokas - 85.94%	(EFD) J. Imbrasas - 45.79%	(EFD) R. Paksas - 46.91%
(UEN) R. Pavilionis - 86.68%	(EFD) R. Paksas - 43.01%	
(UEN) E. Maldeikis - 86.89%		

Source: *VoteWatch.eu* data base (accessed 09 November 2020). Collected by the author

<sup>33</sup> Interview with MEP, Socialists Democrats, 2020, Vilnius, interview by phone.

Analysing the loyalty trends of the first Lithuanian representatives in the European Parliament during the sixth term of the EP (2004-2009), we see that only four out of fourteen Lithuanian representatives who worked in the European Parliament had a loyalty rate of less than 92 percent. The members of the Socialist Democrat Group were most loyal to their political group. The overall average loyalty of MEPs to their political groups during this term is 92.6%. However, it is worth noting that the representatives of the major political groups in the EP are more loyal - the European People's Party (average - 94.9%), the average of the members of the Socialist Democratic Group (Lithuanian representatives) - 97.16%, and the Liberals (ALDE) - 93.2. Meanwhile, the loyalty of the representatives of the Eurosceptic EP political groups elected in Lithuania (R. Pavilionis, E. Maldeikis, G. Didžiokas) to their political groups is much lower - 86.5 percent. This also confirms the general trend in international research that members of Eurosceptic EP political groups are less loyal to the leadership of their political group than to members of other EP political groups. During this, the sixth term of the EP, this tendency is also typical in the case of Lithuania.

During the seventh term of the EP (2009-2014), the total average of all loyalty indicators of MEPs elected in Lithuania to their political groups in the European Parliament is 86.31%. It is thus lower than the average of the previous term, but the loyalty rates of MEPs belonging to the major political groups in the EP remain high. Meanwhile, Eurosceptic political groups - have much less loyalty.

Further researching the work of the elected representatives in Lithuania in the European Parliament during the eighth term of the European Parliament (2014-2019) - again we notice that they were mostly loyal to their political group. During this term, the overall average loyalty of all MEPs to their political group was 91%. Thus, it increased in comparison with the average loyalty of the Lithuanian EP representatives to their political groups of the previous term but did not reach the average of the sixth term (2004-2009). Mr. R.Paksas, a member of the Eurosceptic EP political group, was the most disloyal, disagreeing with his political group by more than 53%, although he was vice-chairman of his EP political group. The percentage of loyalty of Eurosceptic representatives of Lithuania, who belonged to different political groups of the EP, differed significantly - V.Tomaševskis - 87.67%, and R.Paksas - 46.91%. However, there is a tendency for representatives of Eurosceptic groups to be less loyal to their EP political group than to other, especially the major, political groups in the European People's Party and the Socialist Democrats. The general trend also confirms the hypothesis that, in most cases, Members of the European Parliament are sufficiently loyal to their political group in the EP during the term of office.

The qualitative survey interviewed respondents sought to find out how their national political parties influence their decisions and work in the European Parliament. Most respondents emphasized that their national party leadership did not have much influence over their work in the European Parliament. Respondents mostly stated that they were contacted by the national embassy in Brussels to present certain national priorities and to seek their support in the European Parliament. However, during the interviews, most respondents, especially those belonging to opposition national parties, stated that they did not always support the national government's stated priority, especially on issues related to social matters (such as carriers' working conditions) or sexual minority rights. Meanwhile, a majority of MEPs interviewed said they generally supported the national government's position on foreign policy issues, in particular support for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and increased support for farmers.

Members of the European Parliament V. Mazuronis and A. Guoga, who belonged to different national political parties, changed political groups in the European

Parliament in the middle of their terms of office. In both cases, the political group was changed due to the poor relations of these MEPs with the national party leaders, who decided to leave their national parties and replace them, which also shows that relations with the national party and its leadership have an impact on the work in the European Parliament.

### **Loyalty dynamics of MEPs elected for more than one term in the European Parliament**

Some international comparative research on MEPs' activities identifies a tendency for MEPs' loyalty to their political groups in the European Parliament to increase during their first term and to decline, following re-election, during subsequent terms. In order to test this hypothesis in the context of the Lithuanian case, the loyalty indicators of MEPs elected in Lithuania for more than one term are also compared.

**Table 2. Dynamics of loyalty of re-elected MEPs to the EP political group**

MEP	First term of office	Second term	Third term
V. Blinkevičiūtė	98,38 proc.	97,74 proc.	-
Z. Balčytis	97,92 proc.	97,14 proc.	-
J. V. Paleckis	96,40 proc.	96,90 proc.	-
V. Landsbergis	93,51 proc.	95,93 proc.	-
L. L. Andrikienė	96,46 proc.	96,74 proc.	97,48 proc.
A. Saudargas	97,27 proc.	96,54 proc.	-
V. Uspaskich	82,99 proc.	90,98 proc.	-
R. Paksas	43,01 proc.	46,91 proc.	-
V. Tomaševski	86,39 proc.	87,67 proc.	-

*Note: Compiled by the author based on Vote Watch.eu, the period included is the sixth, seventh and eighth terms of office of the EP*

Comparing the dynamics of the loyalty of MEPs re-elected in Lithuania to their political groups during their different terms - it can be noticed that in most cases their loyalty has increased (see Table 2). Only in three cases out of eight it slightly decreased (A. Saudargas - from 97.27 to 96.54 and V. Blinkevičiūtė - from 98.38 to 97.74; Z. Balčytis - from 97.92 to 97.14), but even in these cases the decrease was very small and may be within the margin of error. It is also important to note that all these re-elected representatives of Lithuania (see Table 2) joined the same political group in the EP during their second term as during the first term. In the case of L. Andrikienė, who worked for three terms, her loyalty to the EP political group increased during each term. V. Uspaskich's loyalty to the EP political group increased significantly during his second term - 2014-2019 (from 82.99 to 90.98), the loyalty of the members of the Eurosceptic political groups of the EP also increased during their second term - in the case of R. Paksas increased by 3.9 percentage points, and in the case of V. Tomaševskis - by 1.28 percent.

Thus, these indicators identify a different trend in Lithuania compared to previous case studies in other countries, as in the case of Lithuania, the loyalty of re-elected MEPs more often increased than decreased during their second term. This shows that working for a long time in the European Parliament increases their socialization with colleagues and strengthens their relationship with this institution.

**Table 3. Loyalty of Eurosceptic Lithuanian MEPs to EP political groups**

MEP	First term of office	Second term
R. Pavilionis	86,68 proc.	-
G. Didžiokas	85,94 proc.	-
E. Maldeikis	86,89 proc.	-
J. Imbrasas	45,79 proc.	-
R. Paksas	43,01 proc.	46,91 proc.
V. Tomaševski	86,39 proc.	87,67 proc.

*Note: Compiled by the author based on Vote Watch.eu, the period included is the sixth, seventh and eighth terms of office of the EP*

Assessing the indicators of all MEPs elected in Lithuania who joined the Eurosceptic EP political groups during different terms of office (see Table 3), it is noticeable that their loyalty to the EP political groups is much lower compared to the loyalty of Lithuanian MEPs who joined the major EP political groups. Nevertheless, the representatives of the Lithuanian party "Order and Justice" in the European Parliament, whose loyalty to their political group in the EP did not reach 50%, showed the greatest disloyalty.

### Conclusions

The European Parliament has already become one of the most important decision-makers within the EU, influencing the economic and social lives of all Europeans. The decisions taken in this institution affect the output of all EU legislation. Following the last EP elections in 2019, this institution has become even more fragmented in terms of political power, as the two major EP political groups are no longer enough to form a grand coalition. This is why the issue of loyalty and voting trends have become even more important in order to ensure the effective functioning of this EU institution.

This article sought to clarify the issue of loyalty and voting trends in the European Parliament in the case of Lithuania. As the comparative analysis of different EP terms of office has shown, most members of the European Parliament elected in Lithuania are quite loyal to their EP political group, but after deriving the general average of loyalty, the very first Lithuanian representatives in the European Parliament were more loyal. A comparison of members of different political groups also shows that members of the major EP political groups, the European People's Party and the European Socialists, are more loyal to their political groups than other MEPs. Eurosceptic MEPs are less loyal to their political groups.

Meanwhile, a comparison of the loyalty of the same member during his different terms of office shows that, in most cases, loyalty to the EP's political group increases during the second term. This can be explained by the consequences of the phenomenon of socialization, where in the long run even Eurosceptic MEPs tend to identify more with the EP as an institution, as Lithuanian case shows.

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