

History and Memory in the European Parliament: Reflections on Transgressing Boundaries between Academia and Politics

Histoire et mémoire au Parlement Européen : réflexions sur la transgression des limites entre le monde académique et le monde politique

Professor Wolfram KAISER, PhD 

University of Portsmouth & College of Europe, Bruges

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Abstract

This article explores the role of history and memory in the European Parliament. Informed by the author's experience of heading the newly established European Parliament History Service (EPHS) in a part-time role during 2022-24, it reflects on the nature, challenges, and fragility of transgressing boundaries between academia and politics on the science-policy interface in a transnational institution. The trajectory of the EPHS demonstrates inter alia how much effective interaction between academia and politics in such a context depends on key bureaucratic decision-makers themselves being intellectually curious enough and politically willing to transgress boundaries.

Keywords: European Parliament, European Union, history, memory, European Parliament History Service

Résumé

Cet article explore le rôle de l'histoire et de la mémoire au Parlement européen. S'appuyant sur l'expérience de l'auteur à la tête du nouveau Service d'histoire du Parlement européen (EPHS) dans un rôle à temps partiel au cours de la période 2022-24, il réfléchit à la nature, aux défis et à la fragilité des

Corresponding author:

Professor Wolfram KAISER, PhD, University of Portsmouth & College of Europe, Bruges

E-mail: wolfram.kaiser@port.ac.uk

efforts de dépasser les limites entre le monde académique et le monde politique au sein d'une institution transnationale. La trajectoire de l'EPHS démontre notamment que l'efficacité de l'interaction entre ces deux sphères dans un tel contexte dépend fortement de la curiosité intellectuelle des principaux décideurs bureaucratiques et de leur volonté politique de dépasser leurs limitations professionnelles.

Mots-clés: *Parlement européen, Union Européenne, histoire, mémoire, Service Historique du Parlement Européen*

Introduction

When I was offered to head the European Parliament History Service (EPHS) within the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) in a part-time role, I was excited about the prospect of spending fifty per cent of my professional life in Brussels. Taking on the task of building the EPHS and shaping its activities in the European Parliament (EP) would allow me to transgress – to use Bourdieu's (1993) terminology – the boundaries between the fields of academia and politics. I could potentially make a small but useful contribution to European Union (EU) politics by cooperating with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and staff from the political groups and the administration, inserting insights from historical and interdisciplinary research into EP politics and policymaking. Such opportunities to transgress boundaries are hard to come by and challenging in times when researchers at universities suffer from over-evaluation based on rigid professional norms of cultural production while democratic (European) politics is increasingly breathless, fractured, and without sufficient space for reflection.

My two-year stint in the EP between 2022 and 2024 was rewarding for my team and for the beneficiaries of our various activities. It also gave me insights as an academic-practitioner into the changing bureaucratic practices that fostered and curtailed our attempts to support more historically reflective politics and policymaking. These insights I was able in turn to contrast with prevalent views in the multidisciplinary academic literature about the EP and EU and the role of history and memory.

Against this background, this article sketches the motivation behind the creation of the EPHS and outlines its main activities on the science-policy interface. It then goes on to analyse the transformation of its institutional trajectory effected by the newly appointed EPRS director-general with the backing of the new EP secretary-general, in the broader context of heavily technocratic administrative reform in 2024. The article concludes with some reflections on what our experience can tell us about the nature, challenges, and fragility of transgressing boundaries between academia and politics, especially in a transnational European context.

Lacking expertise: origins of the European Parliament History Service

On the initiative of the then Secretary-General of the European Parliament, Klaus Welle, the EPHS was set up within the EPRS in mid-April 2022, with me as its Head of Service initially to report directly to the Director-General of the EPRS, Anthony Teasdale, the last remaining senior British official in the EP, who retired at the end of June 2022; and then to Etienne Bassot, the Acting Head of the EPRS before Anders Rasmussen took over in November 2022. Formalised in May 2023, the EPHS was moved into the Members Research Service (MRS) with responsibility for all policy field-related work. From then onwards, I reported to its director, Bassot.

Welle was from the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and had worked as secretary-general first, of the European People's Party from 1994 to 1999 and then of its group in the EP from 1999 to 2004 (Westlake, 2024; Gehler, 2023). He subsequently served as Director-General for Internal Policies before becoming head of the cabinet of Hans-Gert Pöttering, the German EP president from the same party (Gehler & Gonschor, 2022), from 2007 to 2009. He was then the EP secretary-general from 2009 until the end of 2022. Welle firmly believed that for the EP to be effective, it would need to bolster its own expertise in policy research, to reduce its “intellectual dependence”

(Teasdale, 2024, p. 186) on the European Commission and the member-state governments. Modelled to some extent on similar institutions like the Congressional Research Service in the United States, Welle created the EPRS as a separate directorate-general in 2013 (Teasdale, 2024; Revesz, 2023; Christie, 2014).

At the same time, Welle's vision was also informed by a strong attachment to the core values and practices of the early Christian democrat-dominated European integration (Kaiser, 2007). These values included Franco-German reconciliation, close relations with the US, the broadly federalist direction of integration, respect for the norms now incorporated in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, and a mixed economy. As a strong proponent of EU enlargement, Welle sought to conceive of the EP's role as much more than legislation to include fostering a more aligned understanding of European history, and lessons to be learned from it – the key motivation behind the decision taken during Pöttering's presidency to create the House of European History that opened in Brussels in 2017 (Kaiser, 2017a).

Within the EPRS, Teasdale initiated some research on the history of the EP following its first direct elections in 1979 (Corbett et al., 2024). The EPRS lacked both institutional leadership and sufficient expertise in this field, however, so that its initial activities were fragmented and focussed on traditional outputs in the form of externally commissioned reports. Thus, Welle was quick to seize the opportunity of the suggestion to professionalize the EP's work on history and memory. The EPHS's objectives were broadly defined as conducting research into the history of the European Parliament, national parliaments, and transnational democracy; helping to inform EP politics and policymaking through insights from historical research; as well as informing citizens through accessible formats about the contemporary history of the EP and European integration.

When I was asked to head the future EPHS, I was able to mobilize my extensive academic networks and research expertise in the fields of history of European integration (e.g. Kaiser & Schot, 2014; Kaiser, Krankenhagen, Poehls, 2014; Kaiser, 2007) and of the European Parliament (e.g. Kaiser, 2022; Bardi et al.,

2020) including critical perspectives on its politics of history and memory up to then (Kaiser, 2021; Kaiser, 2017a; Kaiser, 2017b; Kaiser, 2015). In addition to already having prepared an expert study for the EPRS, I also had relevant work experience in the German Bundestag and the European Commission, which would clearly facilitate transgressing the boundaries between academia and politics.

For me, to head the EPHS in a part-time role, constituted an excellent opportunity to facilitate internal and external research on the history of the EP in the broader context of European (integration) history. It also posed the fascinating challenge to try and bring serious historical research to the MEPs, the political groups, and the administration in ways that would be both intelligible and relevant for them – something that could help secure at least some creative space for reflection in a political institution dominated by daily routines, political pressures and a strong focus on legislative policymaking. It was essential for my agreement to head the EPHS that it became institutionally embedded in the EPRS on the science-policy interface (and not, for example, in the Directorate-General for Communication), which secured the prospect of independent research and non-partisan policy advice.

Taking charge: events, publications, and videos

Having agreed with Teasdale the priority tasks for the two years of my tenure to establish the EPHS, we created a team of three full-time staff until December 2022 and started activities in six different categories. As the EPHS had a very specific set of tasks for a small team which differed greatly from those of other teams, it was largely exempt from core MRS routines like responding to MEP requests for research support. Comprising the first category, however, we did occasionally take on such tasks when their focus was specifically historical. For example, I (co-) drafted speaking notes *inter alia* on what (if anything) could be learned from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia for contemporary global conflicts for Othmar Karas, the First Vice-President of the

EP, for an international conference in Münster; or for Rainer Wieland, another vice-president, on new perspectives on 60 years of the 1963 Elysée Treaty, for a Franco-German event in Strasbourg.

For the events as the second category, Welle had tasked the EPHS with organizing what we decided to call “historical appraisals” of recently deceased EP presidents. We made sure from the beginning that these events had no commemorative function. Instead, they combined an academic with relevant expertise in the biography and the domestic and European political trajectory of the individual concerned, with another former MEP and a former official, who had worked closely with the president and who were ideally from different countries and political groups. In December 2023, for example, such a historical appraisal was devoted to José Maria Gil-Robles, the Spanish EP president from 1997 to 1999, who had died earlier that year.¹

While these types of events were organized in hybrid format, most other events were held online to maximize participation. They connected historical research to current issues, sometimes using an anniversary as a hook. For example, we chose fifty years of the first 1973 EU enlargement as such a hook to get three academics to talk about the motives for the membership applications of the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland, elite accession narratives, and the actual experiences of membership. Subsequently, an MEP engaged in EU enlargement connected the historical insights with current challenges, including regarding Ukraine.² Another event was devoted to 70 years of the formal existence of the political groups, with an introductory lecture by an academic and a roundtable

¹ “European Parliament President José Maria Gil-Robles: A Historical Appraisal”, December 6th 2023: <https://youtu.be/lqwipjkY-gA> (accessed February 3rd 2024).

² “50 Years of Enlargement: From Past to Future”, April 26th 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lmi2QGEcYM8&t=3s> (accessed February 3rd 2025).

conversation with three former group chairs as eyewitnesses.³ Yet other events focussed on the role of the EP in the democratic reform of the EU and in the Europeanization of new policy fields in historical perspective, for example.⁴

As a third category, some internal publications in the form of longer “briefings” and two page “At a Glance” documents were connected to the events while others responded more directly to current EP concerns. These shorter text-based formats provided core information and interpretation in a succinct manner to make them relevant and digestible for pressed-for-time MEPs, their staff, and officials. The first briefing (Kaiser & Vintila, 2022) addressed, for example, how the EP debated the break-up of the Soviet Union at the end of December 1991, connecting this to contemporary controversy about how the EU should respond to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Another, related example is a briefing on EP debates in the early 1990s about the need for closer EU cooperation on arms procurement and defence (Kaiser & Berger, 2024), with equally obvious contemporary parallels. In advance of the 2024 European elections, moreover, other briefings addressed the EP’s changing perceptions of the role of citizens in the emerging polity and the first 1979 direct elections (e.g. Pittoors, 2024).

To advance historical knowledge about the EP, the EPHS also created – as a fourth category of activities – cohesive annual sets of archive-based internal and external studies on key themes produced collaboratively through four EPHS online workshops with academics and EPRS staff as discussants. Each study was combined with a shorter executive summary-type briefing. During 2022-23, three studies explored the role of the EP in addressing issues of social policy (Roos, 2024), the environment

³ “70 Years of Transnational Groups in the European Parliament”, June 27th 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk9zVEqukB0> (accessed February 3rd 2025).

⁴ “70 Years European Parliament and EU Democratic Reform”, March 8th 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lmi2QGEcYM8&t=3s> (accessed February 3rd 2025); “Shaping Policy: The European Parliament and the Environment, Consumer Protection, and Social Policy”, February 13th 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oa0Nc6B6TcgP> (accessed February 3rd 2025).

(Meyer, 2024), and consumer protection (van de Grift & van Zon, 2024). The studies identified and analysed comparatively (Kaiser et al., 2025) the tools and strategies used by MEPs, political groups, and committees to influence policy Europeanization during what we called the long 1970s when the EP did not actually have any legislative decision-making powers. The second set of studies during 2023-24 was devoted to the EP and the end of the Cold War including its role in the democratic transition in Eastern Europe.

The two final categories of EPHS activities were still at the early implementation stage, when my two-year tenure to build up the service ended in April 2024. We set up an academic network of 450 researchers and officials with an interest in the history of the EP, with a first online event held in February 2024 – to strengthen cooperation, report on ongoing research and findings, and to identify collaborators for EPHS and other EP events and studies. And lastly, we made a start with producing videos, podcasts, and blogs to popularize research about the history of the EP for citizens.⁵

Moving on: from space for reflection to relentless technocracy

From the start, most EPRS staff – especially in the MRS - supported the work of the EPHS and saw the potential for collaboration on current policy issues. Just as the policy analysts contributed their knowledge about current issues to strengthen the connections between the past and the present in EPHS publications, the EPHS team occasionally commented on

⁵ See, for example, Wolfram Kaiser, “Seventy years of transnational political groups in the European Parliament”, February 2024:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKNdrk62Czw> (accessed February 3rd 2025); Gilles Pittoors, “The European Parliament and the European Citizen as Voter”, February 2024:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)757569](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)757569) (accessed February 3rd 2025); Wolfram Kaiser, “Normative Power European Parliament?”: <https://southcoastdp.ac.uk/normative-power-european-parliament/> (accessed February 3rd 2025); “History of the European Union”, High on History: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfvzt9s4IFQu> (accessed February 3rd 2025).

historical aspects of manuscripts by other EPRS staff. As their most prevalent disciplinary background was in law and political science, their historical knowledge naturally varied substantially. In one extreme case, I had to alert another EPRS staff that they were using euphemistic Nazi German terminology for discussing the 1938 anti-Jewish pogrom in a draft briefing on genocide, something that if published in that form and noticed would no doubt have provoked a scandal in the EP.

Cooperation with Teasdale and Bassot was equally smooth. Both shared a commitment to a value-based EP and EU and had a strong interest in history. As a result, both supported the need for historically informed EPRS events and outputs and more generally, for MEPs to become more sensitive to nationally and ideologically diverging perceptions of the past and how they could negatively impact cooperation and policymaking. The same was true for other top managers, who were approachable, offered advice on suitable eyewitnesses, chaired an EPHS event or participated as an eyewitness. The Former Members' Association also strongly supported the EPHS. Its members including former presidents, group and committee chairs cooperated as eyewitnesses for interviews, contributed to panels or participated in events.

Beyond the number of MEP requests or participants in events, during my tenure the EPRS did not collate information systematically about the take-up of its different outputs, which is in any case hard to measure. At the most general level, however, we identified three core cleavages in terms of interest in our work. The first was the ideological cleavage. More federalist-minded MEPs were concerned by what they perceived as the EP and the EU's progressive loss of normative orientation and collective identity and for this reason alone, strongly supported the EPHS. At the same time, the far-right groups, which lack institutional continuity, suffer from frequently changing membership and are at best ambivalent about the EU, were disinterested in (although not openly hostile to) our work.

The second cleavage was spatial. MEPs and staff from the extended "core" of Western European integration including

member-states like Portugal and Spain, for example, were generally more responsive and supportive. While willing to chair events, for example, MEPs from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe – even from strongly pro-integration centrist parties and groups – clearly did not see the history of the EP and the EU before the 2004-7 Eastern enlargements as “their” history. And thirdly, older MEPs with a longer service in the EP were more concerned about the importance of knowledge about the past for the future of the EP and EU. In contrast, younger MEPs were generally more preoccupied with building their political career investing more heavily in networking and policymaking.

Despite only positive feedback both from MEPs and EPRS staff, however, Rasmussen, the new EPRS director-general, with the backing of the new Secretary-General Alessandro Chiocchetti radically changed the institutional trajectory of the EPHS in 2024. Having been appointed to their roles as part of a backroom deal among some political groups about the distribution of key management posts (Hanke Vela & Gijs, 2022), Rasmussen proved to be a relentless bureaucratic technocrat with no interest in the core original EPRS task, namely maximizing the EP’s own expertise and strengthening the science-policy interface. From the beginning, the Danish manager was interested exclusively in structuring processes of policymaking – his responsibility as deputy secretary-general – and not in its content; or, in other words, only in how the EP (co-) legislates, but not why, or its broader role in European democracy. Hence, his interest in the EPRS including the EPHS was minimal, and its future quickly became embroiled in vendettas against the initiatives of predecessors, larger debates about administrative reorganisation, and a scramble to build bureaucratic fortresses and secure personal influence.

In the end, allegedly to “regularize” it, Rasmussen transferred the EPHS to another directorate, renamed it HIST, and relocated it from Brussels to Luxembourg, ostensibly to comply with an agreement with Luxembourg over the distribution of staff between seats. Ten months after the end of my contract, a new head of service had still not been appointed. Not surprisingly, staff with strong expertise moved back to academia, to be replaced with

two librarians without such expertise, when the EP's so-called Historical Library in Luxembourg was closed. With HIST literally moved to the margins of EP politics and none of the new staff boasting any expertise in the history of the EP or European integration, Rasmussen advised the now responsible director strictly to limit HIST's activities and focus on producing factual timelines of EP "events" as well as possibly commissioning some external studies.

Lessons learned: political mobilisation and institutional behaviour

Having successfully built the EPHS with its six categories of activities during the two years of my tenure as its head, I have since been free to work on aspects of the history of the EP and transnational democracy in my university role and on a project basis. This changed situation allows me to draw several lessons from the EPHS experience for our understanding of how EU institutions deal with history and memory.

The first concerns political mobilisation around history, or the question what makes history conflictual in a supranational institution with MEPs and staff from 27 member-states. It turns out that expertise-based analysis and discussion of the history of working together in a set of common institutions with legally binding policymaking is not particularly controversial – this despite manifold clashes in the history of the EP over the deepening of integration, the EU's enlargement, political party influence and institutional power or the shape of policies. MEPs and staff find it comparatively easy to discuss in a reflective manner the EP's own history and their role in it. Rather, the main fault-lines in terms of history and memory have concerned, and to some extent continue to concern, the divided history before shared history, especially the assessment of Stalinist, Nazi German and fascist regimes and their crimes during the twentieth century – controversies that since the EU's 2004-7 Eastern enlargements have repeatedly provoked heated debates about totalitarianism, which mostly ended in compromise resolutions

(see e.g. Neumeyer, 2015; Perchoc, 2015; Littoz-Monnet, 2013) and which are also reflected in its treatment in the House of European History (Kaiser, 2021).

The second lesson concerns the EP's collective will to try and impose a particular vision of the past internally or in its relations with citizens. In the early post-Cold War period as a dynamic time of "building Europe", some social scientists analysed and still assessed the ambition of supranational institutions as far-reaching: attempting to create a European identity and allegiance to common institutions through "cultural engineering" from above (e.g. Shore, 2000). The ever more politically fragmented EP in the mid-2020s, however, neither possesses such a collective political will nor the instruments to disseminate let alone impose one vision of its past to legitimize particular futures. Discarding earlier foundational narratives of the "founding fathers" by dissolving them into multiple stories about "great Europeans", as in the now so-called Network of Houses and Foundations of Great Europeans that the EP supports,⁶ reflects sharply reduced nation- and state-building ambitions. The resulting openness to pluralistic perspectives on the history of the EP in the context of European (integration) history is arguably more appropriate for a more mature polity and facilitates engagement by professional historians on the science-policy interface. At the same time, the heterogeneity of the EP could also result in the loss of shared institutional, cultural, and historical memory, which has potential to provide orientation points for politics and policymaking.

The experience of the EPHS also suggests modifying historical institutionalist political science interpretations (Pierson, 2004) of European integration (e.g. Rittberger, 2005). These essentially claim that institutional paths, once created, are subsequently difficult to modify. At the micro level of administrative organization, however, this is clearly not the case. Despite strong lobbying for the EPHS and its established activities

⁶ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/infographics/euhouse/en#projects> (accessed December February 3rd 2025).

from vice-presidents and other MEPs, it was as easy for Rasmussen and Chiocchetti to transform the service into an empty institutional shell with – for the time being – few meaningful activities, as it had been for Welle to institutionalize it in the first place. Clearly, institutional innovations in the field of history and memory can be started and transformed to the point of making them meaningless when few resources have been invested and outsider academics with temporary contracts hired to perform the tasks. In contrast, despite similar views of the House of European History as not forming part of “core business” – defined by technocratic officials like Chiocchetti and Rasmussen as only the production of legislation (Chiocchetti, 2024) – it would likely be impossible to close an institution such as this with great public visibility following enormous and irretrievable financial investments.


Lastly, the experience of the EPHS in the broader context of the administration’s ongoing reorganization also symbolizes a shift towards a technocratic transactional approach to running the EP. Following Welle, the Bureau installed senior managers without any clear notion of the EP as a parliamentary institution in a transnational democracy. They no longer focus on questions of institutional identity and democracy, which Welle also prioritized, but exclusively on administrative processes and the production of legislation. Their technocratic approach includes the multiplication of highly paid senior management positions, which offers the political groups greater shares from a larger cake of more posts to fill to ever lower levels of seniority. This approach is also designed actually or potentially to broaden access to this cake to political groups on the right, starting with the European Conservatives and Reformists Group dominated by the Fratelli d’Italia party of Prime Minister Georgia Meloni with its neo-fascist history (Bressanelli & de Candia, 2023; Kaiser, 2022) – something that clearly favours an entirely presentist perspective on the EP and European (integration) to erase politically problematic traditions and memories.

Conclusion

Building the newly created EPHS in the EPRS with a small team for two years proved to be exciting and rewarding in different ways. Despite having to get used to different, but equally or more ridiculous bureaucratic rules and constraints than prevail in academia, we were able to develop a set of activities that attracted interest from current and former MEPs and staff in the political groups and the administration. Until the arrival of the new director-general, working in the EPRS was both fulfilling and enjoyable. We were able to make a small contribution to a form of EP and EU politics and policymaking informed at least in part by some degree of reflection on divisive and shared history and memory and how it relates to current and future issues and challenges.

Our experience was eventually also one of deep frustration with the simplistic bureaucratic-technocratic logics of the new senior EP managers, however. Their way of thinking and acting purely in terms of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and political opportunity, was fundamentally incompatible with transparent expertise-driven politics and policymaking. It posed a radical threat not necessarily to the existence in some hollowed-out institutional form of the EPRS and the EPHS (renamed HIST) within it, but to their contributing in meaningful ways to the work of the MEPs and the staff of the political groups and the administration. Our experience of building the EPHS in this way also showed how much effective interaction between academia and politics on the science-policy interface depends on key bureaucratic decision-makers themselves possessing a broader vision of transnational democracy and being intellectually curious enough and politically willing to transgress boundaries.

ORCID iD

Wolfram KAISER  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8522-9087>

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Author biography

Wolfram KAISER is Professor of European Studies at the University of Portsmouth, UK, and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium. From 2022-24 he also headed the newly created European Parliament History Service in Brussels in a part-time role. Kaiser has published widely on the history and politics of the European Parliament, transnational democracy, and European integration; transnational and global history of the nineteenth and twentieth century; and on the politics of memory in Europe. His (co-authored) books include *Shaping European Integration. The Directly Elected European Parliament 1979-1989* (2024); *The European Ambition. The Group of the European People's Party and European Integration* (2020); *Exhibiting Europe in Museums. Transnational Networks, Collections, Narratives and Representations* (2014); *Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels and International Organizations* (2014); *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (2007); *Using Europe, Abusing the Europeans. Britain and European Integration, 1945-63* (1999).