

POLICY PAPER

Invisible but Influential: How Parliamentary Assistants Can Shape the European Parliament's China Agenda

Ivana Karásková (ed.)



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Policy Paper

September 2025

Editor – Ivana Karásková

Citation – Ivana Karásková (ed.), *Invisible but Influential: How Parliamentary Assistants Can Shape the European Parliament's China Agenda* (Prague, Czech Republic: Association for International Affairs (AMO), 2025).

Acknowledgment – The Association for International Affairs (AMO) gratefully acknowledges the valuable research assistance of Emilia Carson, a former AMO intern; Filip Noubel, Senior China Research Fellow; and a former colleague who, owing to current professional commitments, prefers to remain anonymous. We also thank two former political advisers, who wish to remain unnamed, for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

Typesetting – Zdeňka Plocrová

Proofreading – Theo Singleton

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ISBN 978-80-88470-63-2 (print version)

ISBN 978-80-88470-62-5 (pdf version)

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List of abbreviations

AfD	Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland)
APAs	Accredited Parliamentary Assistants
BSW	Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance – Reason and Justice (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit)
CHOICE	China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
ESN	Europe of Sovereign Nations
EU	European Union
G/EFA	Greens/European Free Alliance
GUE/NGL	European United Left/Nordic Green Left
ID	Identity and Democracy
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NA (NI)	(non-attached) Members of the European Parliament (Non-Inscrits)
ODS	Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana)
PfE	Patriots for Europe
PSC-PSOE	Socialists' Party of Catalonia (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya)
PSOE	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español)
RE	Renew Europe
S&D	Socialists and Democrats

Introduction

By design, Accredited Parliamentary Assistants (APAs) – the European Parliament's (EP's) backbone – work largely behind the scenes to keep the institution running. Since March 2025, however, a fresh Belgian probe into alleged Huawei-linked bribery has pushed them uncomfortably into the spotlight. Judicial authorities sealed APA offices in the European Parliament – those of Paolo Campisi and Francesco Vasta, assistants to Italian Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Marco Falcone (EPP),¹ and of Adam Mouchtar, assistant to Bulgarian MEP Nikola Minchev (RE).² Because APAs do not enjoy parliamentary immunity, their offices can be accessed without prior notice, a fact underscored by the operation. In parallel, cross-border arrests and extradition steps have touched figures linked to Italian MEP Fulvio Martusciello (EPP): his assistant Lucia Simeone was arrested in Naples on a Belgian warrant,³ and former adviser Nuno Wahnnon Martins was arrested in France and transferred to Belgium.⁴ A leaked arrest warrant describes a scheme in which tens of thousands of euros from the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei were allegedly routed via false invoices. Parliamentary-assistant-turned-lobbyist Valerio Ottati has been depicted as a central figure in the case.⁵ Meanwhile, in Germany, Jian Guo, a former aide to MEP Maximilian Krah (non-attached) is currently on trial in Dresden on charges of espionage for China.⁶

All those named deny wrongdoing and are presumed innocent. Nevertheless, these recent, well-documented investigations have shed light on deficiencies in the system governing APAs – and, by extension, the European Parliament – raising questions about exposure to malign foreign influence and the effectiveness of existing safeguards.

This paper aims to enrich the discussion by moving beyond personalities and setting aside concrete allegations to scrutinise the system organising the APA function itself: tasks assistants perform, how they are recruited and how they circulate between MEP offices. The paper offers a structured look at more than 3,000 APAs who served during the 9th and 10th European Parliament terms. Methodologically, the paper combines data obtained through scraping of EP website archives, anonymised interviews with current and former MEPs, APAs and EP observers – conducted online and in person during fieldwork in Brussels in October 2024 – with systematic open-source checks in multiple languages to triangulate claims. The analysis is intended to illuminate security deficiencies that may open pathways to malign foreign influence, especially as related to the People's Republic of China. To avoid imputing intent or wrongdoing to individuals, the study omits assistants' personal data from both the text and the interactive visualisation of APA mobility. As MEPs act as public figures, their names remain in the dataset.

The objective is not to securitise the profession or stigmatise APAs, but to propose balanced, proportionate measures that primarily task MEPs and the administration with strengthening recruitment, vetting procedures, conflict-of-interest screening,

supervision and training, while also defending APAs through clearer guidance and protections. Understanding these internal dynamics is essential to bolstering the EP's resilience without casting unfair suspicion on those who make it work.

Recruiting APAs: doors wide open

MEPs hold the authority to recruit and manage a team of parliamentary assistants, financed through a designated budget specifically allocated to support their legislative duties. The European Parliament distinguishes several categories of assistants based on their roles and locations, with APAs being the most visible and centrally involved. There are approximately 2,000 APAs each term,⁷ though this figure fluctuates, as some assistants serve multiple MEPs concurrently.

APAs are directly appointed by MEPs or groups of MEPs and employed under contracts with the EP. They operate at one of the EP's primary locations (Brussels, Strasbourg or Luxembourg).⁸ APAs hold a unique position within the EP's internal structure, navigating complex institutional networks and providing essential support to their MEPs, which underscores their influence in parliamentary processes.

In addition to APAs, MEPs may hire local assistants who work primarily in the MEP's home country, governed by local employment laws and regulations.⁹ These assistants are typically not present in Brussels or Strasbourg, and they often play a less visible role than APAs.

Furthermore, trainees provide an additional layer of support. Traineeships are arranged through agreements with MEPs and may take place within the EP premises or in the MEP's home country.¹⁰ Designed to foster education and vocational training, these roles enhance participants' understanding of parliamentary processes while supporting MEP activities. Due to the inclusion of local assistants and trainees, the total number of parliamentary support staff may reach several thousand individuals, contributing to a varied support structure across the EP.

APAs are recruited either by MEPs individually or by political parties, funded by a collective monthly budget of €29,557, which allows for the hiring of up to three APAs per MEP.¹¹ Though MEPs select their assistants, APA salaries are disbursed by the EP's internal financial framework. The MEPs should not employ close relatives, and assistants must not engage in activities that could create a conflict of interest.¹²

Despite these provisions, the hiring process for APAs is relatively informal, with minimal regulatory checks.¹³ APAs need only submit a clean criminal record and a signed declaration confirming the absence of conflicts of interest. Beyond this, there are no restrictions on nationality, age, or dual citizenship, meaning that individuals with non-EU citizenship, including those from states such as Belarus¹⁴ or China,¹⁵ have previously been employed as APAs. In such cases, hiring is facilitated through easily obtainable exemptions. Moreover, recent EU citizens with prior citizenship in countries such as China or Russia may be recruited under EU citizenship guidelines, reflecting broader EU residency and citizenship pathways through the golden visa schemes in member states like Malta, until April 2025, or, before 2020, Cyprus.¹⁶

BOX 1: HOW APAs ARE RECRUITED AND HIRED

The recruitment pathways for APAs within the EP are diverse and largely unregulated, reflecting the unique demands of each MEP. There are four primary approaches to hiring APAs:

- 1. Direct appointment by MEPs:** Frequently, MEPs select APAs through personal networks or trusted referrals, bypassing public job postings. Trust and loyalty are highly valued, which is why individuals from the MEP's immediate circle – such as national party affiliates or former colleagues – are preferred whenever possible. This approach appears to be the most prevalent method, as indicated by discussions with individuals familiar with internal practices within the EP.¹⁷ Key considerations include the candidate's subject expertise, language proficiency, and flexibility to accommodate the MEP's demanding schedule.
- 2. Advertisement and recruitment based on specific competencies:** Some MEPs choose to publicly advertise APA roles, targeting candidates with specialised skills in priority policy areas.
- 3. Party-imposed appointments:** Political parties may assign APAs to MEPs, often prioritising alignment with party goals or leveraging prior parliamentary experience. These APAs may remain in service over multiple terms to maintain party continuity.
- 4. Retention of predecessors' APAs:** New MEPs frequently retain APAs from their predecessors, recognising their institutional knowledge and operational continuity. It is estimated that more than half of APAs may serve in successive mandates.¹⁸ Transparency is limited, however, as the EP website does not maintain an accessible archive of all APA employment histories, making tracking challenging over multiple parliamentary terms.

This flexible yet opaque recruitment system underscores both the autonomy of MEPs in selecting APAs and the potential challenges in ensuring consistent oversight.

Source: Authors' compilation

Interviewees suggest that APA hiring seems to be guided by personal or political connections, with job advertisements occasionally appearing on websites,¹⁹ including in national languages.²⁰ However, overall transparency in the recruitment process remains limited, with decisions largely driven by informal considerations rather than standardised criteria.

The significance of APAs in the EP's operations, coupled with the informality and limited oversight of the recruitment process, underscores both their strategic value and potential security gaps. The following sections will explore these issues in greater depth, examining the APAs' specific roles, the influence they wield within the EP, and the potential vulnerabilities associated with deficiencies in vetting process.

The contractual framework governing APAs provides minimal stipulations concerning security or confidentiality obligations.²¹ While the framework emphasises trust and the unique nature of the MEP-APA relationship, it lacks formal security screening or vetting procedure requirements for APA appointments. This open and flexible recruitment process, though accommodating, has been shown to increase exposure to potential security risks and conflicts of interest, as evidenced by several documented cases.²²

Following the Qatargate scandal, the European Parliament introduced mandatory online training for MEPs and some trainings for APAs. Yet the modules focus primarily on financial management²³ and harassment prevention.²⁴ They do not address foreign influence, security vetting, or espionage risks.

APAs undertake a range of responsibilities that broadly fall into three principal domains: research and drafting, briefings and strategic advising, and acting as internal and external liaisons. These roles, which combine subject-matter expertise, communication, and institutional navigation, render APAs indispensable to the legislative process and central to the daily functions of MEP offices.

APAs generally have broad access to information, personnel, and physical spaces within the EP, enabling them to navigate the institution. Interviews with current APAs reveal that they frequently engage with one another, attend numerous meetings held by other MEPs, and share information to ensure their MEPs remain informed of cross-cutting discussions. The networked nature of their role provides APAs with a comprehensive view of EP operations, although some areas remain restricted (such as access to sensitive information available to MEPs only in a dedicated reading room).

Externally, APAs manage an array of interactions on behalf of their MEPs. MEPs are often approached by diplomats, industry lobbyists, journalists, civil society organisations, and constituents, all seeking meetings, endorsements, or collaborative opportunities. APAs act as gatekeepers, prioritising access based on the relevance to their MEP's agenda. In cases where a meeting is granted indirectly, APAs determine what information is relayed back and in what form, effectively shaping the flow of information and the perception of stakeholder interactions. APAs also frequently represent their MEPs in internal EP meetings and external events, serving as informal spokespersons in cases where their MEP is unavailable or lacks the necessary expertise.

Beyond these visible functions, APAs are integral to helping MEPs navigate the complex institutional and bureaucratic landscape of the EP and the broader EU structure. Many APAs are retained across multiple legislative terms due to their institutional knowledge and ability to ensure continuity. As one interviewee noticed, some APAs stay for at least two terms to be entitled for pensions.²⁵ This retention trend is supported by the APA union, which compiles and disseminates information about APAs to incoming MEPs seeking experienced staff.²⁶ The result is a high rate of APA 'recycling,' with many continuing in their roles across different MEPs, often

crossing party lines. MEPs, facing demanding schedules and administrative burdens, rely heavily on APAs for logistical support, knowledge of procedural shortcuts, and familiarity with EP protocols. For newly elected MEPs, in particular, a seasoned APA can prove invaluable, providing immediate operational support and facilitating connections with high-ranking EP and EU officials.

In interviews, MEPs frequently describe APAs as ‘advisors,’ underscoring the significant yet often understated influence APAs hold over their MEPs’ decision-making processes. As one APA noted: “If an MEP trusts their APA fully, they can let the APA do virtually all the work – except voting. It depends largely on the personality and work culture of the MEP.”²⁷ While the demands of the position are widely acknowledged, APAs report a high degree of intellectual stimulation and a substantial level of responsibility, often early in their tenure. These dynamics reveal the MEP-APA relationship as a collaborative partnership, with many decisions reflecting a shared process of information gathering and internal discussion, reinforcing the critical but largely unrecognised influence of APAs within the European Parliament.

BOX 2: CHINA COMPETENCE: STARTING FROM SCRATCH

China competence has become an increasingly valued skill among European decision-makers, including some within the EP. However, advanced expertise in this area remains rare, with even foundational knowledge being limited. One approach to addressing this gap has been the recruitment of Chinese language speakers among APAs, as exemplified by former MEPs Maximilian Krah (AfD) and Jan Zahradil (ODS).²⁸ However, recent developments suggest that this strategy may pose certain risks: in particular, the case of Krah’s assistant, Jian Guo – a German citizen with prior Chinese citizenship, who has been arrested on suspicion of spying for China – has highlighted potential vulnerabilities to foreign influence and interference, raising concerns about the balance between expertise acquisition and safeguarding institutional integrity.²⁹

For the vast majority of APAs and MEPs, China competence is typically acquired on an ad hoc basis. According to one APA: “I came with no China knowledge and had to learn on the job. We received informal briefings from external groups and experts and read news and reports.”³⁰

For MEPs unfamiliar with China or Taiwan, reliance on APAs – and occasionally on local assistants or interns – becomes essential. China is also a frequent topic in discussions with other party or faction members, where those with even a basic degree of expertise can exert influence on others’ understanding and perspectives.

Some political parties provide briefings led by policy advisors with specialised knowledge of China-related issues, who can offer well-informed insights and respond to complex inquiries. Additionally, internal party newsletters may circulate overviews of China-related developments, and briefings

by external experts, researchers, or practitioners occasionally supplement the information available to APAs and, when feasible, to MEPs directly.

The European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) also offers foundational information on China, though updates to these resources are infrequent.³¹ Recently, the EP introduced free language courses, including Chinese, for those seeking to develop or improve their linguistic capabilities.³² In practice, APAs are likely to be the primary participants in these courses, as they are best positioned to support MEPs in developing a nuanced understanding of China-related issues.

Source: Authors' compilation

The architecture of APA – MEP interactions

The role of an APA in the European Parliament comes with a unique characteristic: a clean slate every five years. Once a new EP is elected, and new MEPs take their seats, APAs who do not continue in their roles effectively ‘disappear’ from the system, with their profiles removed from the European Parliament’s website. This transience makes APAs an intriguing subject for analysis.

To delve into this underexplored area, the authors of this study conducted detailed data scraping of both current and archived EP webpages listing MEPs’ assistants, covering the period from July 2019 to November 2024. The goal was to examine APA turnover, their mobility across parliamentary terms, transitions between MEP offices, and shifts in political factions or affiliations. The subsequent section presents the findings of this analysis, offering a comprehensive view of the interconnected roles and movements of APAs within the European Parliament.

It is important to note that the archived web pages of the EP from the 2019–2024 period provide only a single snapshot of information. As a result, the dataset may not comprehensively capture all movements of APAs over time, including changes in their affiliations with MEPs, political factions, parties, or specific roles. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Additionally, discrepancies in the spellings of assistants’ names were identified, likely due to manual data entry on the website. While efforts were made to normalize the data, these inconsistencies could have affected the accuracy of the results. Similarly, the authors attempted to account for other potential errors, such as name changes, but these factors should also be taken into consideration when interpreting the data.

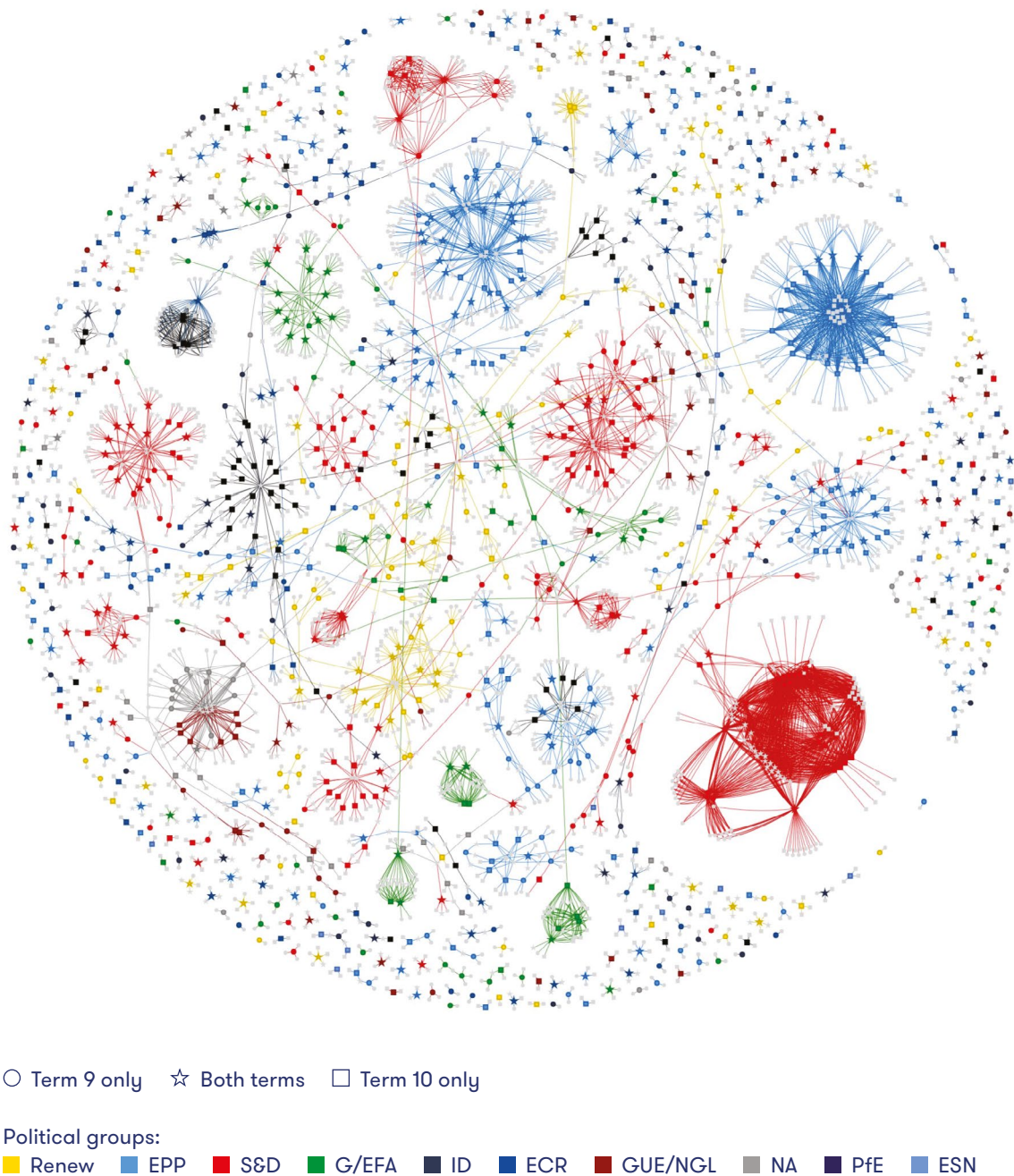
Furthermore, due to the completion of Brexit and subsequent departure of some MEPs from the parliament, or death of MEPs, there was a greater than usual turnover of MEPs during the 9th term. The authors scraped data for 868 listed MEPs, but 210 MEPs had no accessible archived snapshots listing their assistants. While attempts were made to manually supplement the dataset for these cases, doing so introduced inconsistencies that distorted the analysis of APA mobility. To maintain the integrity of the findings, these MEPs were excluded from the study. For the 10th term, one MEP is missing from the dataset, as at the time of scraping, only 719 MEPs were active in the EP.³³

This study explores the relationship between MEPs and APAs by examining two distinct categories of APAs: individual APAs and grouped APAs. Individual APAs are employed exclusively by a single MEP, whereas grouped APAs provide support to multiple MEPs simultaneously. The analysis reveals that APA-sharing among MEPs is particularly common within the EPP and the S&D. Notably, Spanish MEPs demonstrate a higher tendency to share APAs, both within their own political factions and parties and across factional and party lines. Furthermore, the data indicates that

APA-sharing is not limited to a small number of MEPs; some assistants were found to work simultaneously for nine or more members of Parliament.

The trend of employing grouped APAs has been observed across both parliamentary terms. During the 10th term, the newly formed PfE also adopted this practice on a larger scale, with MEPs from the Spanish party Vox being particularly active in sharing their APAs. Overall, it has been observed that during the 10th term there was a growing tendency towards APA-sharing. This is shown in our visualisation where distinct clusters, differentiated by colours, depict the connections between APAs

VISUALISATION 1: CLUSTERS SHOWING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN APAs AND MEPs



Source: Authors

and MEPs. For an interactive version of the visualisation, visit China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) website.³⁴

One notable difference between the two terms concerns cross-faction and cross-party sharing of APAs. During the 10th term, except for a few outliers, a smaller number of such arrangements were observed. For instance, one APA has worked for nine MEPs from seven different countries and eight different political parties, who belong to S&D, The Left, RE and EPP. Another one has worked for six different MEPs from Italy, France and Germany, who belong to G/EFA, S&D and The Left and five different national political parties.

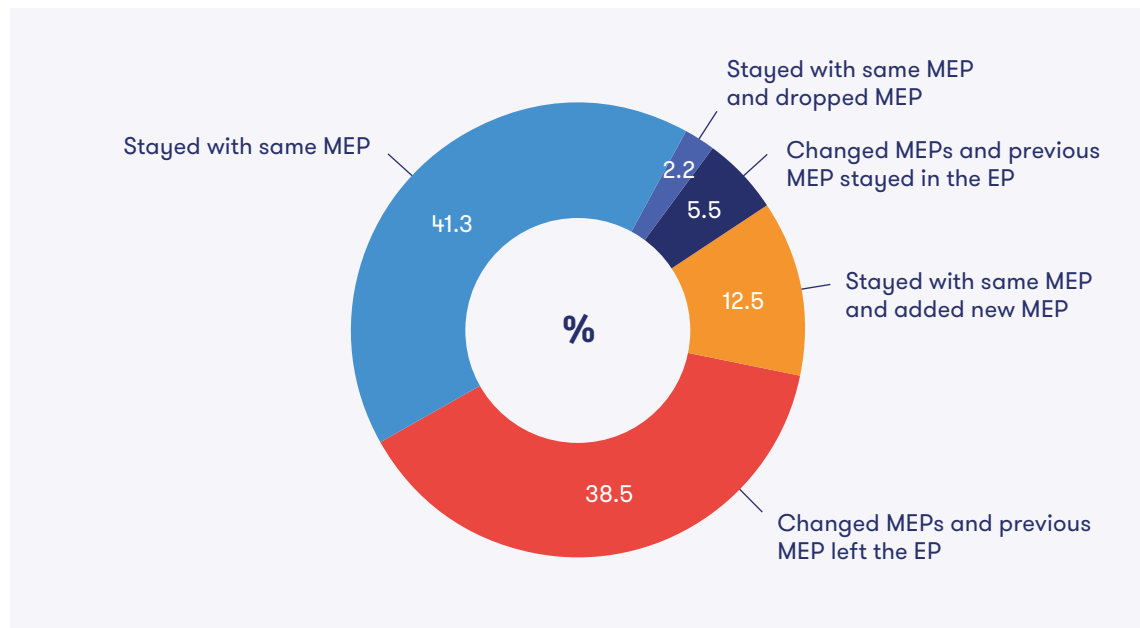
Although the APA-sharing practice can often be attributed to practical considerations such as a shared language, this phenomenon holds deeper significance. The interactions of APAs with MEPs across different factions and political parties grants them access to a wider spectrum of information. This gives APAs a unique position, as they can gain insights into the activities and decisions of MEPs across different political leanings. At the same time, their extensive networks can also make them the primary target of foreign actors that seek to gain access to sensitive information or exert influence over decision-making within the EP.

Out of 1,702 APAs included in the analysis and employed during the 9th parliamentary term, 1,413 were listed as individual APAs, while 299 were listed as grouped assistants. These numbers also include ten assistants that were listed as belonging to both categories. However, when looking at the actual number of APAs that worked for only one MEP during the time that the snapshot was taken, the number stands at 1,477. Similarly, the actual number of APAs that worked for multiple MEPs simultaneously also differs, as our findings show that 225 assistants worked for more than one MEP during the 9th term. This signals that the titles under which they are listed on the website sometimes do not accurately reflect their real engagements.

During the transition from the 9th to the 10th parliamentary term, around 600 APAs remained working at the EP. As of December 2024, the EP was employing 1,990 assistants. Out of those, 1,636 were working for only one MEP while 354 worked as grouped APAs.

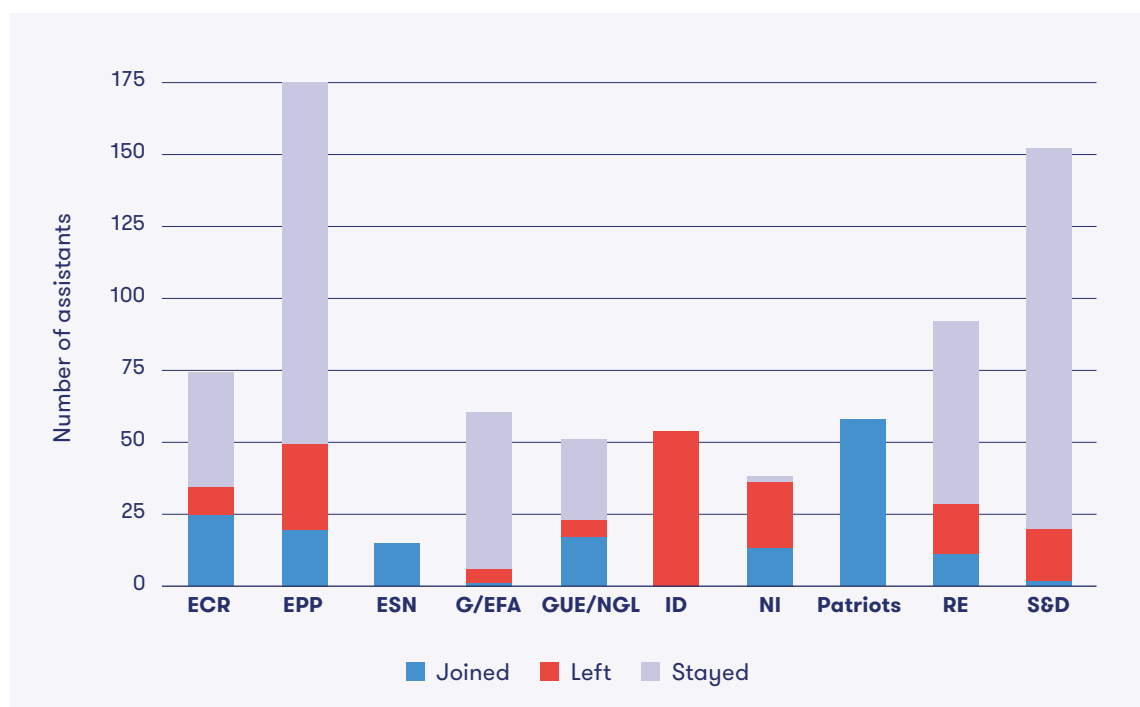
When looking at the APAs that continued working at the EP for both the 9th and 10th parliamentary terms, 41.3% maintained their position with the same MEP(s). Among those who remained working there but switched (or partially switched) to different MEPs, 38.5% of the APAs moved because their original MEP(s) left the parliament, 5.5% moved despite their original MEP(s) retaining their position, 12.5% stayed with the same MEP(s) and on top of that started working for another MEP(s), and a mere 2.2% of APAs stayed with one or more of their original MEPs while also leaving one or more of the MEPs that they worked for during the 9th term.

Graph 1 illustrates that, while a large percentage of APAs stay working for the same MEP(s) across both terms, those that move could have, for the most part, been forced to do so due to the departure of their former MEP(s) from the EP. The MEPs with the highest number of APA changes are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

GRAPH 1: MOVEMENT OF APAs BETWEEN MEPs (FROM 9TH TO 10TH TERM)

Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

In terms of inter-faction movement, Graph 2 shows that, with the exception of the ID group and NI, the majority of APAs that retained their employment for both terms remained working for MEPs from the same political faction.

GRAPH 2: MOVEMENT OF APAs BETWEEN FACTIONS (FROM 9TH TO 10TH TERM)

Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

TABLE 1: MEPs WITH MOST APA CHANGES

MEP Name	Total APA changes
Daniel FREUND	7
Pascal ARIMONT	6
Mircea-Gheorghe HAVA	6
Riho TERRAS	6
Maria NOICHL	6
Marie TOUSSAINT	6
Emil RADEV	6
Karin KARLSBRO	6
Luke Ming FLANAGAN	6
Raphaël GLUCKSMANN	6

Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

TABLE 2: MEPs WITH MOST GROUPED APA CHANGES

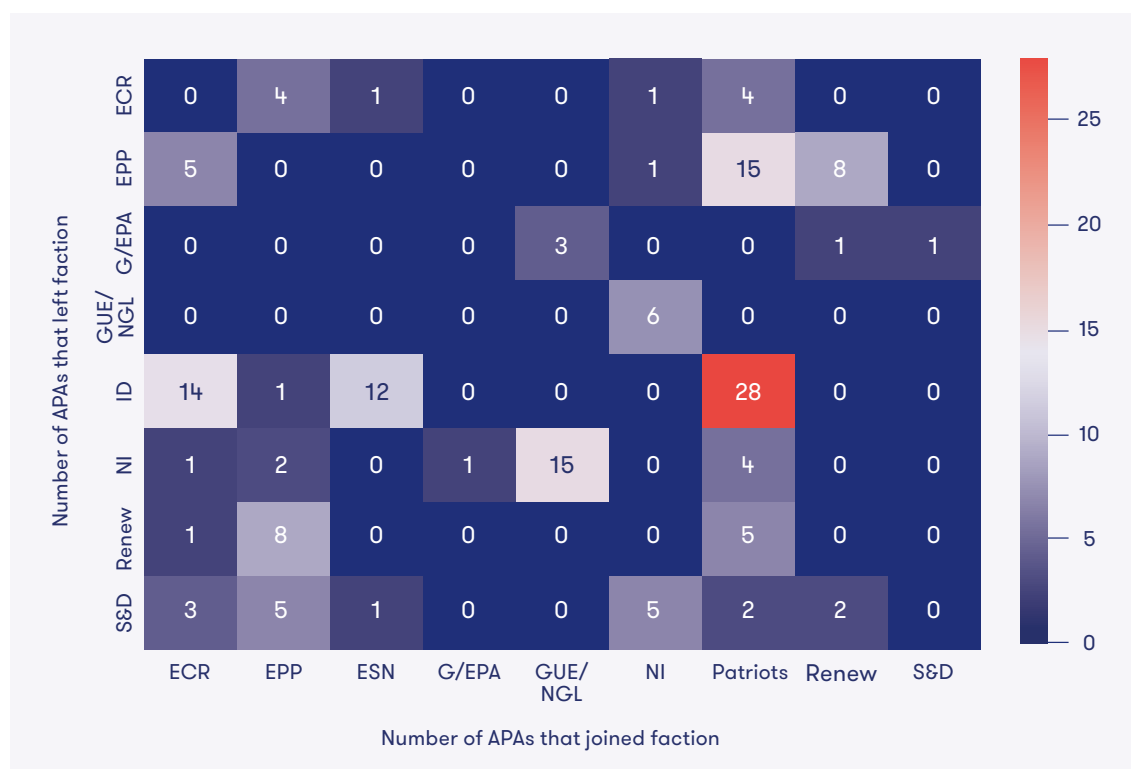
MEP Name	Total grouped APA changes
César LUENA	47
Jonás FERNÁNDEZ	40
Nacho SÁNCHEZ AMOR	24
Nicolás GONZÁLEZ CASARES	24
Iratxe GARCÍA PÉREZ	24
Elena SANCHO MURILLO	24
Alicia HOMES GINEL	24
Rosa SERRANO SIERRA	24
Idoia MENDIA	24
Lina GÁLVEZ	24

Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

A larger-scale movement of APAs was caused by the departure of the ID group from the EP. Since the group is no longer part of the parliament, the majority of the previously ID-affiliated APAs moved to MEPs from the PfE (28), ECR (14) and ESN (12), with only one APA moving to EPP. As such, the majority of these APAs stayed within right-leaning factions. Moreover, another two relatively significant shifts were the departure of 15 APAs from the EPP and their subsequent joining of the newly formed PfE group, and the movement of 15 APAs from non-inscrit MEPs to MEPs affiliated with GUE/NGL. The latter could be cross-referenced with the movement of MEPs – our analysis showed that several non-inscrit MEPs during the 9th parliamentary term showed arguments and beliefs similar to left-leaning political groups. As such, if some of these MEPs switched to GUE/NGL, it is possible that they took their APAs with them.

Graph 3 illustrates the movement of APAs between specific political groups. With regard to MEPs from the newly formed groups, PfE and ESN – which did not exist during the 9th parliamentary term – these currently employ assistants who previously worked for members of ID, ECR, and S&D (for ESN), as well as EPP, NI, and RE (for PfE).

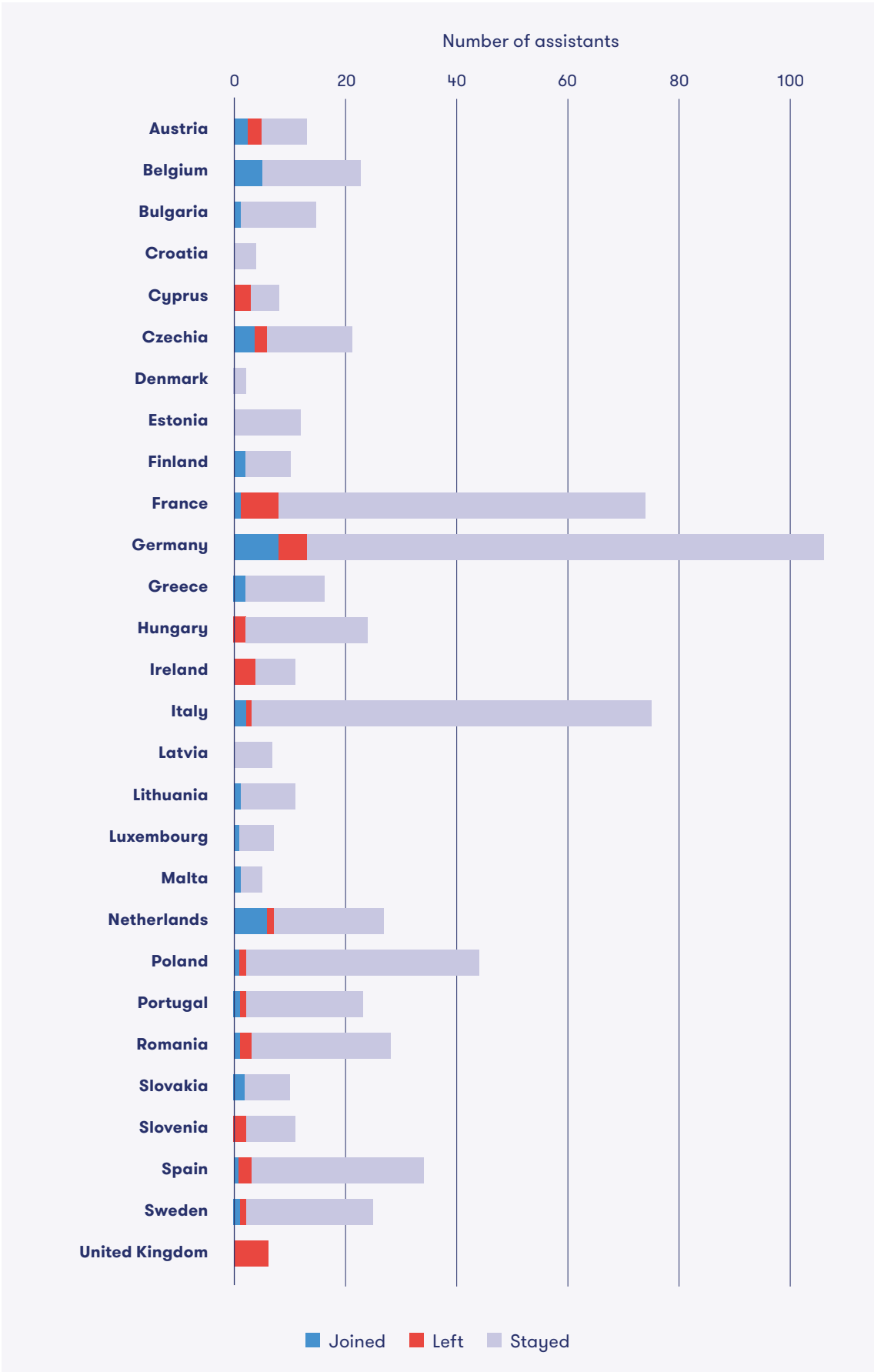
GRAPH 3: MOVEMENT OF APAs BETWEEN SPECIFIC FACTIONS³⁵



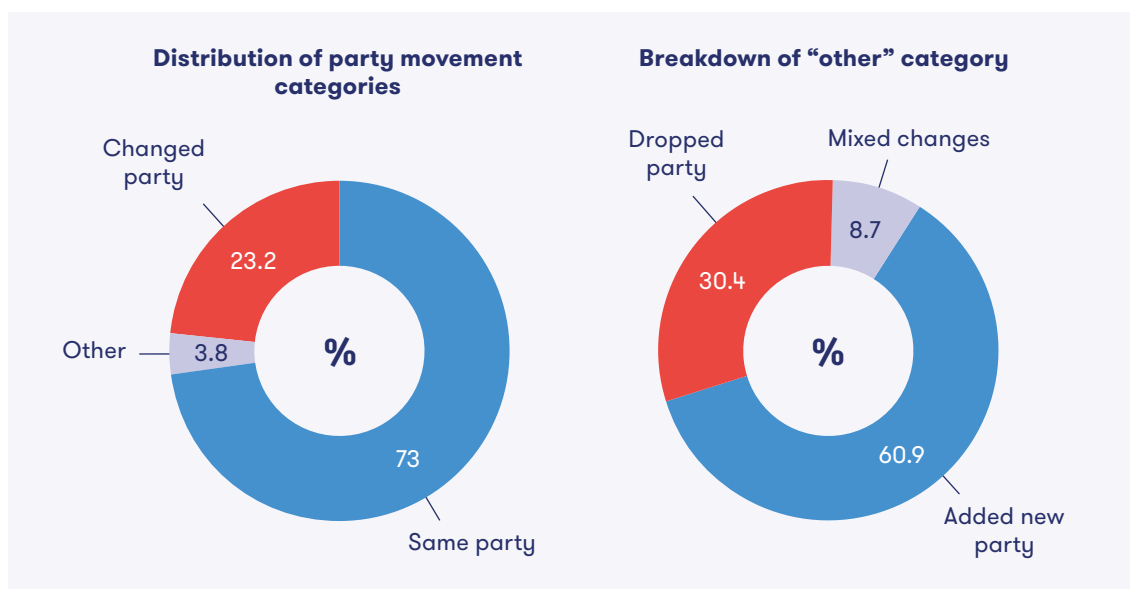
Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

As seen in Graph 4, the situation is similar for APA movement between different countries. The majority of APAs continued working for MEPs from the same countries as during the 9th parliamentary term. As mentioned before, a major movement was caused by the completion of Brexit during the 9th term of the EP.

GRAPH 4: MOVEMENT OF APAs BY COUNTRY



Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

GRAPH 5: OVERALL MOVEMENT OF APAs BETWEEN POLITICAL PARTIES (FROM 9TH TO 10TH TERM)

Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

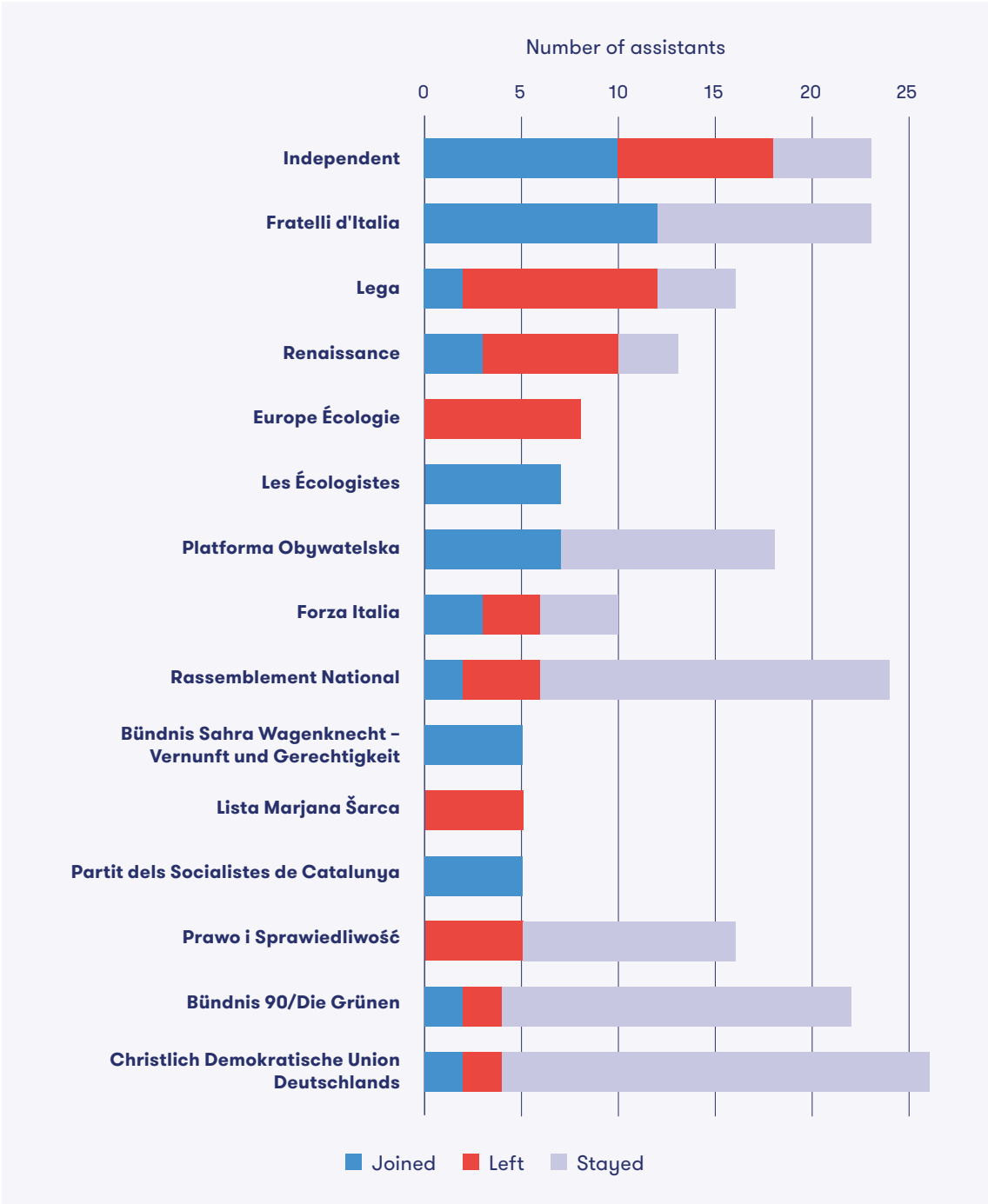
Graph 5 demonstrates the movement of APAs between different political parties between the 9th and 10th parliamentary terms. Out of the 600 APAs that retained their position for both terms, 73% of them remained working for MEPs from their original party. Out of those remaining, 23.2% switched to a different party, while 3.8% went through different changes and most likely were or became grouped APAs (or vice versa).

Of these 3.8%, 60.9% remained working for MEPs from their original party and on top of that started working for MEPs from another party. Additionally, 30.4% remained within at least some of their original parties but also stopped working for at least one of the MEPs from parties that they worked for during the 9th term. This could have been their own decision or caused by their MEPs switching from one party to another. A mere 8.7% went through a mix of these movements.

Graph 6 shows the top 15 parties that experienced the most visible changes in the number of APAs between the 9th and the 10th parliamentary terms. The most significant increase in APAs was experienced by Italy's Fratelli d'Italia and Polish Platforma Obywatelska, with many APAs also joining MEPs with no political affiliation.

In comparison, the largest number of APA departures were observed in France's Renaissance party, Italy's Lega party, and amongst independent MEPs. The noticeable departure of APAs from Italy's Lega could be the consequence of the party's loss of seats after the June 2024 elections. In comparison to 2019-2024 during which the party held 22 seats in the EP, the party secured only 8 seats in the June elections.³⁶ A similar situation was faced by Macron's Renaissance party which also received a blow during the 2024 EP elections, securing only 14.6% of the votes. This might be at least partially responsible for the APA movement shown in Graph 6.³⁷

GRAPH 6: TOP 15 PARTIES BY MOVEMENT



Source: Authors' compilation of MEP profile and assistant data scraped from current and archived European Parliament websites

Note: Les Écologistes and Europe Écologie refer to the same party – the party used the name Europe Écologie until 2023 when it became known as Les Écologistes. As such, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of MEPs and their APAs that are included in the “left” (see Graph 6) for Europe Écologie actually remained with the party under the new name. Moreover, BSW is a new party founded in 2024 and Spanish Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya only became a separate party in the EP with the beginning of the 10th term. In the previous term, it was part of PSC-PSOE with Spain’s Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE).³⁸

Conclusion and recommendations

APAs are indispensable to the European Parliament's daily work, yet they remain largely unseen, often invisible to those outside the institution and taken for granted within it. When they do attract attention, it is usually in connection with scandal, such as the allegation of espionage involving the assistant to Maximilian Krah, or bribery, as the Huawei-related investigations revealed. The publicly known cases risk unfairly casting the profession in a negative light. For researchers as well as security practitioners, however, these investigations have also exposed weaknesses in the system that governs APAs' functioning. A recurring transparency gap compounds the problem: after each electoral cycle, staff pages and records on APAs often disappear or become hard to retrieve, leaving little public information on who they are. Information on recruitment and day-to-day operations is not easily obtainable either, and practices are not unified, varying from one MEP's office to another. Given the strategic importance of these roles and the access they entail, APAs inevitably attract interest from malign foreign influence; this does not imply wrongdoing by assistants, but it underlines the incentives for hostile state actors such as Russia or China to seek contact. Clear, enforceable guidance on APA conduct and on the relationship between MEPs and their assistants is still lacking. These realities motivate the conclusions and recommendations that follow, which aim to improve transparency, clarify responsibilities, and strengthen safeguards while recognising APAs' essential contribution to the EP's work.

Informal hiring and APA mobility are functional features of a workplace that values trust, speed, and institutional memory. The vulnerability arises not from informality itself but from the lack of a clear, proportionate vetting baseline commensurate with the access these roles entail. Interviewed MEPs broadly accepted the need to strengthen safeguards against malign foreign influence yet hesitated over who should own the vetting function and whether additional checks might slow onboarding at the start of a mandate. In practice, this uncertainty pushes offices to prioritise expediency over verification.

The mobility patterns visible across the 9th and 10th parliamentary terms show how continuity among assistants underpins the European Parliament's day-to-day operations. Offices function effectively because experienced APAs carry procedural knowledge forward, stabilise newly elected MEPs, and preserve relationships with other offices and committees. Yet the same continuity can concentrate knowledge, workflows, and stakeholder networks in a small number of individuals. A comparable dynamic applies to grouped contracts – assistants serving more than one MEP legitimately widen access to meetings, draft documents, and cross-committee conversations, improving coordination and workload management. The attendant risk is process-based rather than personal. Without explicit information barriers, a single assistant may inadvertently become a conduit between files that should remain compartmentalised for reasons of sensitivity, confidentiality, or negotiation leverage.

Moreover, if targeting were to occur, experienced assistants with long tenure and grouped roles would be rational focal points because they maximise reach within normal parliamentary operations.

Interviews also described 'need-to-know' principles applied ad hoc, with access to shared drives or document repositories sometimes set broadly at the outset and narrowed only later, if at all. Exposure follows the portfolio, not the person – files touching on trade, industrial policy, dual-use technologies, transport, or security naturally entail wider interaction with external stakeholders and third-country representatives, and the safeguards should track that reality.

The gatekeeping function deserves emphasis. Assistants filter calendars, triage documents, and frame decision memos for busy MEPs. On complex dossiers – China among them – uneven training and inconsistent source transparency can tilt the informational balance toward well-packaged external inputs. This is not a claim of malfeasance; rather, it is an argument for the need for greater skills and knowledge about China, and for higher standards and greater disclosure when dealing with China-related dossiers. The most plausible vectors of undue influence are blended and prosaic – narrative shaping, selective sourcing, and the sequencing of meetings – rather than cinematic espionage.

What emerges is a design challenge rather than a personnel problem. Mobility, continuity, and shared staffing make the institution faster and more coherent; however, in the absence of harmonised baselines and role-based access controls, they also increase the European Parliament's vulnerability towards malign foreign influence. The task is to preserve the former while mitigating the latter by making processes visible enough to audit, narrow enough to respect minimum-necessary access, and predictable enough to be fair. In other words, the appropriate response is to anchor safeguards in access management, record-keeping, and training rather than to securitise personnel. Responsibility sits first with MEPs, under whose authority assistants serve, supported – but not replaced – by administrative services.

The most immediate gap concerns recruitment and vetting. Recruitment practices require a balance of flexibility and clarity. Informal processes make sense from the vantage point of political trust but invite inconsistent standards. A light, standardised set of guidelines – applicable across political groups yet respectful of office autonomy – would professionalise hiring without bureaucratising it. Where feasible, vacancies should be advertised through a common portal, candidates assessed against published criteria, and declarations of potential conflicts of interest updated annually. The aim is not intrusive scrutiny but comparable treatment and a reliable record when questions arise.

The European Parliament does not possess the operational capacity, staffing, or intelligence access to conduct meaningful background checks on APAs, and delegating this function wholesale to national authorities would import uneven standards and legal uncertainties. A proportionate interim solution is both practical and defensible: assistants assigned to foreign-affairs or security-adjacent portfolios should obtain a basic national security clearance prior to taking up duties, modelled on the checks applied to NATO interns. This would create a minimal, auditable baseline for roles with intrinsically higher exposure.

Vetting should be followed by structured onboarding and recurring training which would move beyond perfunctory human resources modules to operational content assistants can use immediately. Upon appointment – and refreshed periodically thereafter – APAs should complete scenario-based instruction covering cyber hygiene, foreign-interference tradecraft, source evaluation, and institutional ethics. The instruction should be practical: how to recognise and record sponsored travel, how to log a meeting with an external stakeholder, how to decline gifts without closing channels, and how to manage calendars and document flows to balance access with confidentiality. Training will matter only if embedded in supervision. Heads of MEP offices should certify completion, discuss lessons in routine staff meetings, and tie portfolio-specific risks to the permissions assistants hold.

Because the European Parliament's own capacity for threat assessment will remain limited, deeper collaboration with national counterintelligence services is necessary. Formalised channels would enable timely risk guidance without ceding staffing authority. A possibility to participate in tabletop exercises and periodic analytic briefings that rely on unclassified patterns and case studies would raise awareness across administrative services and offices.

Process improvements should align exposure with tasks. Role-based access ought to be the norm: permissions tied to an assistant's actual portfolio, automatic expiry when responsibilities change, and lightweight audit trails for sensitive repositories. Shared staffing should be transparent and bounded by simple information barriers, with cross-faction sharing in high-sensitivity committees permitted by recorded exception rather than routine.

Taken together, these measures formalise good practice already present in many offices and protect assistants by raising awareness and creating mechanisms for spotting and reporting undue influence. With proportionate vetting for the most exposed roles, structured training that addresses key challenges, fair and transparent recruitment across groups, and mature cooperation with national services, they will also deliver resilience – ensuring that occasional misconduct investigations, whatever their outcome, do not overshadow a profession that overwhelmingly serves the European Parliament conscientiously.

Strengthening the EP's internal resilience must be understood not as a restriction on democratic freedoms, but as an essential step in protecting the credibility, sovereignty, and democratic legitimacy of European governance in an era of rising geopolitical threats. Where we see seams, hostile foreign powers such as Russia and China see leverage. What we map, they may have already exploited. Therefore, building a robust, transparent, and security-conscious institutional framework is indispensable for ensuring that European legislative processes remain free from undue external influence.

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The Association for International Affairs (AMO) gratefully acknowledges the valuable research assistance of Emilia Carson, a former AMO intern, and a former colleague who, owing to current professional commitments, prefers to remain anonymous.

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The publication was prepared within the China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) collaborative platform. CHOICE is a think net of China experts providing informed analysis on the rising influence of the People's Republic of China within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. It is the largest network of China experts in the Central and Eastern European region, with more than 220 contributors from 30 different countries.

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Footnotes

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