

Routledge Advances in European Politics

THE PARLIAMENTARY DIMENSION OF THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

SYNERGIES AND LEGITIMACY CLASHES

Edited by

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Lucy Kinski



The Parliamentary Dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe

This book offers a comprehensive and timely analysis of the parliamentary dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) – an unprecedented experiment in which parliamentary representation met transnational citizen participation in the European Union (EU).

Across twelve chapters, the book investigates the CoFoE as an opportunity structure for both the European Parliament (EP) as the “host” of the process, and national as well as regional parliaments, as the “guests” in this process, to fulfil and revitalise their key functions in EU multi-level democracy. The book also provides a valuable source of insights for representatives in national parliaments and the newly elected European Parliament (2024–2029), to hopefully prompt them to rethink their relationship with citizens in the ever-evolving transnational democratic space of the EU.

Bringing together both academics and practitioners, this book will be of key interest to anyone interested in parliamentary representation, citizen participation, and democratic legitimacy in the EU and beyond.

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**Edited by
Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka
and Lucy Kinski**

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Abbreviations

AFCO	European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs
CoFoE	Conference on the Future of Europe
CoR	Committee of the Regions
COSAC	Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union
EB	Executive Board
ECC	European Citizens' Consultations
ECI	European Citizens' Initiative
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EPP	European People's Party
Greens–EFA	Greens–European Free Alliance
GUE/NGL	The Left in the European Parliament
ICM	Inter-parliamentary Committee Meeting
ID	Identity and Democracy
JD	Joint Declaration
MLPF	Multi-level parliamentary field
NP(s)	National parliament(s)
RP(s)	Regional parliament(s)
Renew	Renew Europe
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
TEU	Treaty on European Union
V4	Visegrád Four
WG	Working Group

Foreword: A Democratic Journey for Twenty-first Century Europe

Kalypso Nicolaidis

Reader, whether you have long been asking or whether you are asking anew about the state of European democracy, whether you foolishly still believe – against all odds – that parliaments can make a crucial difference for the health of our democracies against the unrelenting assault by executives and bureaucracies, whether you take sides or not in the rivalry between the European Parliament (EP) and its national counterparts, or whether you count yourself as a sceptic or a fan of people power – this is the book you must read, especially in the aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament elections meant to herald a new mandate for an enlarged and geopolitical Europe.

In this ambitious edited volume, its brilliant editors, Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Lucy Kinski have gathered a rich array of authors to pave a novel pathway towards understanding and renovating the multi-level, polycentric and transnational democracy that is the European Union (EU). We must thank them first and foremost for offering a ray of hope amidst the doom and gloom that pervades our diagnosis of the state of democracy in Europe. Let us not succumb to despair, they tell us. Both as analysts and as citizens, we are lucky to be able to draw on a fascinating laboratory of democratic change where a new relationship between citizens and their national or European representatives has begun.

This laboratory has a name, mostly unknown to the wider public, “The Conference on the Future of Europe” (CoFoE), a strikingly understated name for a year-long series of political encounters (2021–2022) nested at the heart of the three EU institutions. The records of CoFoE, as it is now referred to, offer the analyst a means to tap this unprecedented experiment for all the political wisdom it might have to offer, as a deliberative exercise on a transnational scale that came close to granting real, if temporary, power to the peoples of Europe. What have we learned then?

Since the book is framed as an encounter between host and guests, you may, Dear Reader, imagine this story as a play, or rather a play within a play that is the European Union. At the start, the European Parliament offered the stage, but is cramped in its hosting role by its cumbersome friends, the Commission, and the Council. Its guests of honour are supposed to be all the other parliaments of

Europe, but in the end, the central protagonists turn out to be some 800 ordinary citizens, randomly selected among the wider public.

As with any good play or any messy good democratic plot for that matter, this is not a story of harmony. As the plot unfolds, *affinités électives* shift and are redefined, exposing cleavages that were meant to stay unspoken. This could have been a parliamentary moment. National and European parliamentarians seem to be poised to forge a new alliance against other seats of power, in cahoots with their purveyors of legitimacy, namely citizens. Yet, it turns out that both sides of the alliance were fragile. Parliamentarians united may have acted as entrepreneurs advocating on behalf of citizens sharing the stage, but many of them, it turns out, would rather eschew the competition for the starring role for, after all, these upstarts do not seem to know their lines and have not accumulated the acting experience of our MPs and MEPs. But, of course, the latter's alliance is also fleeting, as our EP host is loath to give up control of the action in favour of its parliamentary guests.

The book then is about the spaces opened by these shifting alliances, cleavages, and clashes. With such an unruly cast, it may not be such a great surprise that CoFoE failed to fulfil its promise of democratic renewal. After all, it was but the last incarnation of a trend whereby EU institutional actors, who might move the chairs around and change the decor from time to time, welcome a bigger cast from civil society but without letting outsiders redo the decor or rewrite the plot. In other words, the EU may have embarked on a “participatory turn” (Saurugger, 2010) at the coming to force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, but such a turn has failed to scale up from consultation to democracy, from focus groups to wider publics. In this spirit, engaging citizens directly as atomised, ununionised individual actors creates the ultimate aporia whereby the “citizen turn” (Oleart, 2023) dampens the flame of citizens' engagement.

Thankfully, the authors provide us with all the material we need to figure out what really happened and what could have happened differently at CoFoE, by showcasing polycentric Europe in all its glorious variations. They ask about different parties and different issues. They probe the many faces of the European Parliament and visit many national parliaments, even regional parliaments. Moving from the Portuguese to the French, Czech, German, Swedish, Dutch and Spanish parliaments, we explore how each has different relations to the EU and the EP, and thus different capacity to engage with CoFoE as well as different national prisms through which to ask: *What has Europe done for us or to us?* And we witness how each of all these actors, parties, and parliaments has used what the authors call the “opportunity structure” provided by CoFoE to put forward their own agenda for EU reforms.

In the end, this is a positive story: promise there was and promise there still is – present in CoFoE's attempt to establish a new kind of interface between the participatory and representative dimensions of European democracy. This is not an easy proposition, bringing together, as it does, radically different spheres, different sociological and political cultures, different configurations of incentives, and different modes of state-society relations. CoFoE remains, I would surmise, an ephemeral experiment that will only morph into a sustained and institutionalised

practice if top-down initiatives such as the European Citizens' Panels or an eventual EP youth assembly can be supplemented by bottom-up ones on the part of civil society actors. And this, in turn, might require no less than a permanent transnational People's Assembly on our continent.

My play metaphor and its grounding in the empirical side of this book ought not to detract from its theoretical import. Drawing on the concepts of multi-level parliamentary field and *demoicracy*, the volume's premise is that achieving genuine transnational interconnection between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of European democracy, between national democratic spaces among themselves as well as between them and the supranational democratic space of the European Parliament, will not happen without intermediation on the part of parliamentary actors.

This promise is at the heart of *democratic* theory, which sees the EU as a much more ambitious polity than a national democracy, "a union of peoples who govern together but not as one" thus obliged to invest every possible option for horizontal entanglement between its peoples without pretending to merge them. In a genuine *demoicracy*, citizens should not be asked to acquiesce to policies that create vast transnational democratic externalities between them, even though they mostly interact in different political spaces – for example, the domain of national parliaments. Instead, they should debate and decide among themselves, with the support of their national and European Parliaments, about the difficult issues and trade-offs raised by their era. This is what citizens' assemblies can help achieve. As we argued in the CEPS-SWP *Radicality of Sunlight Report* (Nicolaidis, von Ondarza and Russack, 2023), parliaments ought to empower citizens by multiplying channels for mediated and unmediated popular sovereignty. Hence, our proposal to hold Citizens' Panels physically in national parliaments, for them to become temporary agoras for the exchange of views between citizens and national MPs, thus facilitating "Europeanising" domestic political spaces.

For all their ambitious agenda, the authors gathered here remain humble. They do not take an exclusive standpoint on the respective roles of participation, deliberation, or changing modes of representation. They do not offer any single model for how national parliaments should interact with their European big sister. Rather, they invite us to probe deeply into the interactions between various forms of democracy, along the parliamentary/representative/participatory/deliberative spectrum, explore their mutual synergies and potential clashes, with the aim of providing insights on how to better design inclusive democratic instruments.

Out of these pages a powerful plea emerges: This moment offers us an unprecedented opportunity for parliaments in Europe and the parties that inhabit them to find new ways to re-engage with citizens, improve their communication, harness their transnational expertise and further their legitimacy vis-à-vis their electorates in the EU context. European *demoicracy* will require a radical innovative transformation of our existing liberal form of democratic representation. Elections, political parties, and parliaments ought to be embedded within new transnational ecosystems for civil society and citizen participation, while leveraging the power of the Internet to connect citizens in multilingual physical and virtual spaces.

The stakes are high. For while, as argued in this book, the CoFoE may have stood as a laboratory for European democracy, I believe that the EU itself can serve as a laboratory, one among others, for the third democratic transformation ushered in by our technological revolution, a transformation involving the combination between many temporal and spatial scales of democracy. Anyone, whether academic or practitioner, feeling enthusiastic about such a prospect, can hardly do better than to start the journey in the pages that follow.

Florence, 11 May 2024

Preface and Acknowledgements

We are delighted to present this edited volume on the parliamentary dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), published in the year of another fateful election to the European Parliament (EP).

The book benefited significantly from feedback received at the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference in Prague in September 2023, where contributors presented their chapters in the panel “Parliaments, Citizens, and the Future of Europe: Synergies or Legitimacy Clashes?” We also organised an online workshop as part of the Jean Monnet Chair *ReDemo* of the University of Wrocław, titled “The Parliamentary Dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe: Experiences from Selected Chambers” on 10 November 2023. We thank all participants for their very valuable comments and suggestions on these occasions.

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Introduction

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Lucy Kinski

It [the Conference on the Future of Europe] is a unique experience because it is the first time that we combine – if I can tell it like that – the representative democracy as we know it with the participatory democracy that is represented by the citizens.

Guy Verhofstadt, 9 November 2021¹

The European Union (EU) and its member states face a “polycrisis” (Bressanelli and Natali, 2023; Kinski, 2023; Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan, 2019), characterised by a series of intertwined emergencies, ranging from health and climate to the economy, from migration, security, and defence to democratic backsliding, and populist anti-pluralism. We witness an increasing polarisation in European politics and societies (Casal Bértoa and Rama, 2021), accompanied by populist electoral gains, decreasing trust in representative institutions at national and European level (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014), and widespread citizens’ dissatisfaction with democracy (Hobolt, 2012; Standard Eurobarometer, 2023; Wike et al., 2019).

Some have argued that below this “polycrisis”, there is a deeper crisis of representative democracy (Brause and Kinski, 2024; Kinski, 2023). As traditional representative institutions, parliaments and parties increasingly lose the linkage to those they represent (Hagevi et al., 2022; Webb, Scarrow, and Poguntke, 2022). At the same time, the transnationalisation of politics and the interconnectedness of societies make it ever more difficult for representative institutions and actors to deliver adequate policy solutions and to be responsive to their citizens’ demands, particularly in times of crisis (Mair, 2013; but see also Crespy, Moreira Ramalho, and Schmidt, 2024). Political lines of conflict are changing, and the European integration of so-called “core state powers” (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2014) linked to national sovereignty, territory, and identity becomes more and more contested.

One of the proposed remedies to this crisis of representative democracy in Europe and beyond is the enhancement of participatory practices, tools, and mechanisms (see, e.g., contributions in Bherer, Dufour, and Montambeault, 2016 and in Jacquet, Ryan, and Van der Does, 2023) such as petitions, citizens’ consultations, or participatory budgeting (De Vries, Nemec, and Špaček, 2022). At the EU level, this ‘participatory turn’ (Saurugger, 2010) was institutionalised in the Lisbon Treaty,

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most prominently through the European Citizens Initiative, which relies mainly on organised civil society platforms aggregating citizens' support for particular policy initiatives. Over the last years, many democratic innovations to enhance citizens' participation in the decision-making process have proliferated both at national and EU level, for instance in the form of deliberative mini-publics, such as the Irish Citizens' Assembly (Farrell and Suiter, 2019) or Citizens Dialogues and the European Citizens' Consultations (ECC) (Stratulat and Butcher, 2018). Yet, the most spectacular and unique of these undertakings certainly is the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Taking place between May 2021 and May 2022, the Conference constituted an unprecedented transnational experiment, in which randomly selected citizens were invited to discuss and propose recommendations for EU policy and institutional reforms.

The Conference on the Future of Europe

Introduced as an experimental deliberative and participatory exercise on a transnational scale (Abels, 2023; Alemanno and Nicolaïdis, 2022; von Sydow and Kreiling, 2022), the CoFoE gathered citizens, civil society organisations, and representatives from EU institutions and member states in a series of consultations and debates. The underlying aim of this undertaking was to give citizens a voice to identify and address the EU's challenges and priorities. The idea of the Conference was originally proposed by the French President Emmanuel Macron in his open letter to European citizens published in spring 2019 in leading national newspapers across EU member states (Macron, 2019). Despite being a challenging task, the European Parliament (EP), the Commission and the Council of the EU decided to adopt the idea and translate it into reality. This endeavour required the organisation of a transnational, multilingual and inter-institutional forum for participatory and deliberative democracy, one which aimed to be inclusive but manageable and conclusive at the same time. While the start of the Conference had originally been scheduled for May 2020, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it had to be postponed by a year. Eventually, the process was officially launched at an inaugural event on 9 May 2021 (European Parliament, 2021).

Drawing on the experience of existing EU participatory tools, such as the European Citizens' Initiative, Citizens' Dialogues or the Commission's public consultations, as well as on national-level deliberative exercises, such as the French Citizens Convention for Climate (Giraudet et al., 2022) or the Irish Citizens' Assembly (Farrell, Suiter, and Harris, 2019), the three EU institutions agreed on the aim, scope, and structure of the Conference by signing a Joint Declaration (JD) on the Conference on the Future of Europe on 10 March 2021 (CoFoE, 2021a). Based on this Declaration and on the subsequent Rules of Procedure of the CoFoE (CoFoE, 2021b), the deliberative centrepiece of the Conference were four European Citizens' Panels made up of 200 randomly chosen citizens each representing the EU's socio- and geographic diversity.² Their aim was to work out recommendations for EU reforms in nine thematic fields: Panel 1: "A stronger economy, social justice and jobs", "Education, culture, youth, and sport", "Digital

transformation”; Panel 2: “European democracy”, “Values and rights, rule of law, security”, Panel 3: “Climate change and the environment”, “Health”; Panel 4: “EU in the world”, “Migration”.

Over the course of a year, each panel met for three deliberative sessions lasting over the weekend. The first set of sessions was held at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the second set of sessions was online, and the third in higher education institutions in four European cities: Dublin, Florence, Maastricht, and Warsaw (Natolin). While the deliberative sections of the panels were held behind closed doors so that citizens could feel at ease when expressing their views, there were also public sessions where citizens shared their experience and presented their recommendations. At the end of the third set of sessions, the proposals drafted by panel participants were voted on by all panel members and those reaching the threshold of 70 percent were adopted. In addition to these European Citizens’ Panels, six member states (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania, and the Netherlands) organised National Citizens’ Panels whose input was also taken into account (CoFoE, 2022).

The recommendations adopted by the Citizens’ Panels were then systematically presented and debated during seven so-called Conference Plenaries³ as well as at the meetings of nine thematic Working Groups.⁴ Importantly, these two forums gathered not only the citizens but also representatives from EU institutions and member states, including members of domestic parliaments. Besides the physical forums for discussion, the CoFoE had also set up a Multilingual Digital Platform (European Parliament, 2022a) which aimed at providing a hub for ideas and input from a multitude of events taking place under the umbrella of the Conference. The whole process of the CoFoE was conducted under the authority of the presidents of the three EU institutions, that is, the European Parliament, the Commission, and the Council acting as a Joint Presidency supported by an Executive Board,⁵ and a Common Secretariat (see CoFoE, 2021b, for more information on the governance structure and modus operandi, see endnotes 3 and 5).

While the Covid-19 pandemic had forced the organisers to postpone the launch of the Conference by a year, the concluding part of the process was overshadowed by the disastrous Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Four out of the seven meetings of the Conference Plenaries took place in the context of war at the EU’s Eastern flank. In these geopolitical circumstances, representatives from Ukraine also participated in the Plenary, including Ukrainian refugees, members of the Ukrainian parliament, the *Verkhovna Rada*, and representatives of the Strasbourg-based association *PromoUkraina* (European Parliament, 2022b).

On 9 May 2022, after a year of transnational and inter-institutional deliberations, the Conference concluded its work, putting forward a final report (CoFoE, 2022) adopted by the CoFoE General Assembly and addressed to the three EU institutions, including 49 proposals for EU reforms composed of over 326 concrete actions. Many of the citizens’ proposals made it into the final report (Crum, 2023). Notably, some measures proposed by citizens would require treaty changes, whereas the vast majority (around 90 percent) can be implemented within the current treaty framework. While the three EU institutions collectively committed to follow-up

on citizens' recommendations within their sphere of competence, each of them presented a different approach to the matter. The EP expressed a maximalist position and called upon the Council to open a Convention leading to the revision of the treaties (European Parliament 2022c, d). The Commission presented a more self-restraining, yet substantial approach, publishing a list of actions it committed to undertake on proposals falling in its competencies during the 2019–2024 legislative term, with many proposals already in line with its agenda (European Commission, 2022). It has responded to one of the innovative proposals put forward by citizens, namely to establish citizens' panels and incorporate their feedback on the Commission's legislative proposals as a permanent feature of the EU decision-making process, although rather as "ad hoc mini-publics to be convened by the Commission at its convenience and on carefully pre-selected topics" (Patberg, 2023, 14). To date, four citizens' panels have been initiated on the topics of food waste, learning mobility, virtual worlds, and energy efficiency.⁶ The Council, on the other hand, was the most sceptical of the three institutions, reflecting most of the member states' longstanding reluctance to touch the treaties (Crum, 2023). According to the latest assessment of the Council Secretariat published in December 2023 (Council of the EU, 2023a, b), a significant number of proposals and related measures are currently addressed or have already been addressed by the EU institutions.

Why This Book?

For many observers of EU political life, the CoFoE might appear as a relatively irrelevant political process that has not meaningfully impacted European integration and is unlikely to do so in the future. However, for democracy scholars, there are at least two important implications of this unprecedented experiment for the functioning of EU democracy. On the one hand, CoFoE can be interpreted as a manifestation of a broader trend that Oleart (2023a, b) has termed the EU's 'citizen turn'. Diverging from the participatory turn, which stressed the importance of civil society as the intermediary, the citizen turn is focused on linking 'ordinary' citizens directly to the EU institutions in the agenda-setting phase of the policy-making process. This 'direct linkage' means that citizens participate as individuals, and the process is not mediated by civil society actors or organised interests. As shown by Oleart (2023b), this changing way in which the EU institutions conceive of participatory democracy may lead to the depoliticisation of EU politics as it fails to foster the transnationalisation of public spheres by putting aside the traditional intermediaries, such as civil society actors or political parties. This, according to Oleart, may minimise political conflict and create an apolitical form of citizen participation in EU policy-making.

To a large extent, we agree with this critical assessment and the potential dangers of such a 'citizen turn'. At the same time, one cannot overlook another, 'brighter side' of the process, namely that the CoFoE has been an attempt to establish an interface between the participatory and representative dimensions of EU multi-level democracy. In fact, CoFoE for the first time brought together a transnational group of citizens and their parliamentary representatives (Members of the European Parliament

(MEPs) and members of national (MPs) and regional parliaments of the member states) in one plenary room to discuss the outcomes of citizens' deliberations. **This parliamentary dimension of the CoFoE, so far rather sidelined in academic debate and political evaluations of the Conference, is the topic of this book.**

Contrary to some political observers' attempts to dismiss the CoFoE as a mere democratic 'window-dressing' or marketing effort that should have been ended even before it began (Baneth in EUobserver, 2021), we decided to dive deeper into the parliamentary dimension of the Conference, including its representative-participatory interface that is the link between parliamentary representatives and their citizens. Given its unique setup, CoFoE provides an especially fertile ground to study this relationship within EU multi-level democracy. The importance of reconciling participatory and representative channels with one another is acknowledged in both theoretical and empirical research on democratic innovations and EU politics alike (excellent contributions in Jacquet, Ryan, and Van der Does, 2023, and in Jancić, 2023; see also Landemore, 2020; Setälä, 2017; Wilker, 2019).

Given that the CoFoE was concluded in May 2022, the scholarship on this topic is still emerging. Existing studies focus on the participatory dimension of the Conference (e.g., Alemanno, 2022; Oleart, 2023a, b), the quality and prospects of this citizen engagement (Alemanno and Nicolaidis, 2022) or citizens' ideas about representation during CoFoE (e.g., Puntsher-Riekmann, 2022). Others have included member states' as well as regional perspectives (most notably, Abels, 2023; Geuens, 2023; Aländer, von Ondarza, and Russack, 2021) or the supranational party-political dimension of the process (Johansson and Raunio, 2022). While scholars have engaged with the prospects and models for EU constitutional reform and treaty change (e.g., Crum, 2023; Fabbrini, 2021; Seubert, 2023), others have moved to an evaluation of the potential democratic contribution of the permanent citizens' assemblies instituted after CoFoE (Abels et al., 2022; Organ, 2023; Patberg, 2023). **What is currently missing is an analysis of the multi-level parliamentary perspective of the process** along with an evaluation of its broader significance for EU democracy. This includes parliamentary representatives' attitudes and preferences towards CoFoE.

Our collected volume contributes to filling this gap by investigating how the CoFoE was an **opportunity structure** for both the **European Parliament** as the **"host"** of the process, and **national** as well as **regional parliaments**, as the **"guests"** in this process, to fulfil their key functions in EU multi-level democracy (Kinski, 2021; Raunio, 2011; see also Chapter 1 by Borońska-Hryniewiecka, and Kinski, and Chapter 11 by Abels in this volume). We look at the extent to which various parliamentary actors engaged with citizens across various formats, acting as **transmission belts or intermediaries between citizens and EU politics** (Auel, Eisele, and Kinski, 2016). Moreover, we investigate the CoFoE as an opportunity and a testing ground for fostering inter-parliamentary cooperation, both in horizontal terms (among national parliaments) and in vertical terms (between national chambers and the EP).

By having the possibility to delegate an equal number of parliamentarians to the CoFoE Plenary and its Working Groups, both the EP and national parliaments

could, in principle, participate ‘on equal footing’ in the discussions on the proposals for EU policy and institutional reforms. Parliamentary engagement is also crucial during the current, follow-up phase of the Conference, in which EU institutions (European Commission, 2024), member states, as well as various expert groups (among others, Costa et al., 2023; Kribbe and Middelar, 2023; Nicolaïdis, von Ondarza, and Russack, 2023) engage in discussions about possible scenarios of EU reforms and their feasibility in the context of the prospective EU enlargement. The most comprehensive proposal of institutional reform was prepared by the EP’s Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) in a report putting forward a set of amendments to the existing treaties. The document was approved by the EP plenary on 22 November 2023 (European Parliament, 2023) and passed on to the Council of the EU, which subsequently referred it to the European Council in December 2023. The parliamentary resolution accompanying the EP report stressed that treaty change is not an end in itself, but an attempt to improve the EU’s capacity to act, and bolster its democratic legitimacy and accountability, especially in view of potential future enlargement. The resolution also called on the European Council to convene a Convention in accordance with the ordinary revision procedure provided for in Article 48(2) to (5) Treaty on European Union (TEU) as soon as possible.

At the time of finalising this collected volume (April 2024), the European Council has not yet initiated any substantive discussion on the EP’s proposal. Taking into account considerable scepticism of some member states with regard to any treaty revisions,⁷ it is unlikely that the Convention will materialise any time soon. However, regardless of when the discussion on the potential enlargement-related reforms will pick up, it will be for the national parliaments, and their governing majorities, to ratify potential treaty changes. At the same time, zooming into the parliamentary dimension of CoFoE allows us to shed light on the relationship between the EU’s two crucial representative channels, domestic parliaments, and the EP, as well as the relationship between European citizens and their parliamentary representatives. **The question is whether we will see more synergies or legitimacy clashes.**

Aims of the Book

Against this background, the underlying goal of this collected volume is to analyse, from a comparative perspective, in what ways the European Parliament, national parliaments (NPs) and regional parliaments (RPs) have used the process of the CoFoE as well as its ongoing follow-up as an opportunity structure to fulfil their policy-making, representation, linkage, and legitimation functions. The analysis will focus on several areas and levels of parliamentary activity and involvement by addressing the following research questions:

- (1) In what ways did the different parliamentary chambers become involved in the CoFoE process, including through delegations, plenary debates, committee hearings, parliamentary questions, or special events?

- (2) How have political parties engaged with the process and the outcome of the CoFoE?
- (3) Have there been any “political entrepreneurs” among the members of the RPs, NPs, and the EP, who were especially (pro-)active in the context of CoFoE, and why?
- (4) To what extent did parliamentary actors engage in horizontal and vertical inter-parliamentary cooperation related to the CoFoE, and what political alliances, if any, have been formed to respond to citizens’ recommendations?
- (5) Which factors shape similarities and differences in parliamentary involvement in the CoFoE?

While a central aim is therefore to map patterns of activities of various parliaments at three levels of analysis (parliament as an institution, political parties within parliament, and individual parliamentary actors), we also seek to explain similarities and differences in the extent and type of involvement. For potential explanatory factors, we can rely on the extensive literature on the behavioural adaptation and preferences of national parliaments with regard to EU governance (e.g., Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Grinc, 2022; Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sacriste, 2024; Hefftlar et al., 2015; Kinski, 2021; Winzen, 2017), and scholarly work on the self-empowerment of the European Parliament (Ripoll Servent and Roeder-Rynning, 2018) (see also Chapter 1 by Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski in this volume).

Addressing these guiding research questions across the book’s chapters will allow us and our contributors to assess whether, to what extent, and why (not) various parliamentary actors have used the opportunity structure provided by the Conference. As the first comparative study of the parliamentary dimension of the CoFoE, the volume contributes to the state-of-the-art theory and empirical research on the interaction between the participatory and representative channels of EU democracy. By providing an in-depth analysis of crucial cases of national, and regional parliaments, as well as the EP based on a common analytical framework, the collected volume does not only unravel potential synergies and clashes between the two democratic channels but also identifies explanatory factors underlying these dynamics. Amidst a deepening crisis of representation in the EU and its member states, CoFoE is an ideal test case to learn about the place of participatory and deliberative democratic innovations in representative democracy and the role of parliaments as “multi-arena players” (Auel and Neuhold, 2017) in EU governance.

What the book does *not* aim to do is provide an all-encompassing evaluation of the CoFoE and its outcomes, including the likelihood of treaty reforms. We also do not want to oversell the deliberative experiment – it was not a game changer. There was hardly any media coverage (see also Crum, 2023), and by and large, the majority of citizens were not aware of its ongoings and outcomes. There was criticism about a lack of representativeness on the national parliamentary side (see, e.g., Kotýnek Krotký in Chapter 3 of this volume), and inclusiveness of the citizen side (see, e.g., Oleart in Chapter 8 of this volume). Finally, external crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian war on Ukraine, but also internal

priority projects, such as the European Green Deal, overshadowed the CoFoE and its follow-up. **At the same time, we must not dismiss the CoFoE and its parliamentary dimension with a simple “parliaments did nothing” because this was not the case**, at least not universally. As will be shown in the following chapters by our contributors, parliamentary actors wanted to have their place in the process and to play a key role in implementing its results from the very beginning. The question is to what extent these ambitions have in fact translated into actions, and whether the latter have produced democratic synergies with other components of the Conference, or rather resulted in legitimacy clashes between them.

Methodology

To study the parliamentary dimension of the CoFoE across the edited volume and uncover how the European Parliament and member states’ parliaments have engaged with the process as well as its follow-up, we apply a comparative case study approach that distinguishes between what we call the ‘host perspective’ (the European Parliament), and the ‘guest perspective’ (national as well as regional parliaments). To ensure a high degree of comparability across the chapters, the individual case studies are situated in a common conceptual framework that we develop further in Chapter 1. The chapters address the same set of research questions (see above), and account for the same analytical dimensions of parliamentary activity including (where applicable) the institutional, inter-institutional, party–political, and individual level. Thus, the contributions to this volume provide a coherent and systematic account of the parliamentary dimension of the CoFoE, both delivering case-specific findings and identifying general cross-case patterns, where possible.

Apart from the European Parliament as the CoFoE ‘host’, the selection of national cases providing the ‘guest perspective’ includes the Czech *Poslanecká Sněmovna* and *Senát*, the Dutch *Tweede* and *Eerste Kamer*, the French *Assemblée Nationale* and *Sénat*, the German *Bundestag*, the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, the Spanish *Congreso* and *Senado* as well as the Swedish *Riksdag*. Moreover, we have added a chapter on the German-speaking regional parliaments of Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Italy (see also structure of the book below). While we unfortunately could not analyse all EU parliaments in this volume, there are several substantive reasons for why we chose this particular subset. First, this selection is geographically diverse as it contains parliaments from larger and smaller member states, founding and more recent EU members, as well as unicameral and bicameral parliaments possessing various levels of formal strength in EU affairs (Winzen, 2012, 2022). Second, the selection also encompasses the crucial cases (Gerring, 2007) as it covers parliaments of the member states who held the rotating Council Presidency during the preparation, course and conclusion of the CoFoE as well as its immediate follow-up (i.e., Portugal, France, and the Czech Republic, respectively). We expect these chambers to have been especially (pro-)active in the context of the CoFoE. Finally, the analysis of the parliamentary dimension of the CoFoE would not be complete without taking into account the

subnational parliaments. At the end of the day, regional parliaments with legislative powers operate in closest proximity to the citizens, are responsible for the transposition of public policies in their administrative realms and play an active part in the scrutiny of EU legislative proposals regarding the application of the principle of subsidiarity. For these reasons, the volume also accounts for the activities of the German-speaking regional parliaments of Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Italy, which have legislative competencies but differed in their level of CoFoE-related activism.

While most contributors to this edited volume come from the field of political science, it also includes lawyers and policy experts who work within both EU and national parliamentary institutions. For comparability, all chapters incorporate a quantitative component on their parliament's activities in relation to CoFoE alongside diverse qualitative methods (Berthet, Gaweda, Kantola, Miller, Ahrens, and Elomäki, 2023). Authors represent various methodological schools, utilising approaches ranging from ethnographic work and participant observation to qualitative interviews with citizens, civil society actors, parliamentarians, and their staff. Hence, the empirical analyses draw from a range of primary and secondary sources, including institutional documents, parliamentary speeches, direct observations, and personal experiences from participating in the CoFoE process. Employing multiple methods to study the parliamentary dimension of CoFoE is advantageous, as it cross-validates overarching patterns and conclusions.

Structure of the Book

This collected volume consists of eleven substantive chapters as well as an Introduction and a Conclusion (Chapter 12). The following presents a synopsis of the substantive chapters.

Chapter 1 provides the analytical framework of the collected volume. It offers a conceptual discussion of the CoFoE as an opportunity structure for parliaments, their potential role as intermediaries between citizens and EU politics, and of the importance of political entrepreneurs seizing those opportunities. In doing so, it situates the European Parliament as a “host” of the process and national and regional parliaments as the “guests” in the process. This framework is embedded into a broader theoretical discussion on the interplay between the participatory and representative dimensions of EU democracy beyond CoFoE.

Chapters 2 and 3 present the “host” perspective and focus on the involvement of the European Parliament in the CoFoE. **Chapter 2** by Gilles Pittoors and Silvia Kotanidis unpacks the reform agenda that drove the EP's actions in the CoFoE and explains how the “host” tried to steer the Conference's conclusions towards its own preferred outcomes. In addition to an assessment of the EP's institutional role in the CoFoE, and an analysis of its visions of EU reforms, the chapter also sheds light on the views of European citizens. It thereby sets the scene and provides the “bigger picture” of the EP's involvement in the CoFoE.

Chapter 3 by Jan Kotýnek Krotký then zooms in on the process and into the EP, raising the question of whether the EP in fact had a homogenous position on

the CoFoE and can therefore be characterised as a unitary actor in the process. It evaluates the extent to which the goals and visions conveyed by the EP's delegation to the Conference's Executive Board regarding the agenda, process, and outcome of the Conference align with the positions of specific political groups, and examines how these positions have evolved and diverged over the course of the process.

Chapters 4–11 present the perspective of the “guests” in the CoFoE process. The “guest” section begins with the parliaments from the three countries that held the Presidency of the Council of the EU while CoFoE was starting, ongoing, and during its immediate follow-up in chronological order: Portugal (first semester of 2021 when the CoFoE structure and aims were agreed), France (first semester of 2022 when the main input from the Citizens' Panels was translated into CoFoE's final recommendations), and the Czech Republic (second semester of 2022 when the three main EU institutions were supposed to present their immediate follow-up on the process in the form of concrete responses to citizens' recommendations).

Consequently, **Chapter 4** by Bruno Dias Pinheiro sets the scene by delving into the CoFoE-related activities of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, explaining both the ambitions and challenges the parliament faced overseeing the parliamentary dimension of the presidency at CoFoE's onset. Portuguese parliamentary actors aimed to ensure equal representation for the national parliamentary component of the Conference with the EP as the European Parliamentary component. Additionally, it also wanted to guarantee a smooth and transparent flow of information from the CoFoE's Executive Board to the national chambers.

In **Chapter 5**, Guillaume Sacriste and Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka continue the focus on the challenges and opportunities posed by the CoFoE, this time to the French bicameral parliament, and its main representatives in the Conference. Taking an individual, actor-oriented perspective, this chapter provides a detailed account of the efforts invested by two parliamentarians, chairs of the EU Affairs Committees (EACs), in achieving consensus on substantial questions of EU institutional reforms among the national parliamentary component of the CoFoE.

In **Chapter 6**, Jan Grinc sheds light on the Czech parliament's handling of the CoFoE based on an extensive analysis of parliamentary documents, interviews, and direct observation. This chapter explains the Czech parliamentary approach to the follow-up of the Conference in light of the country's relatively high levels of Euroscepticism and the parliament's activism in the Political Dialogue with the Commission.

Chapters 7–10 focus on the four remaining parliaments from Sweden, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Chapter 7 by Petr Kaniok closely examines the Swedish parliament as one of the most active and influential chambers in EU affairs. Kaniok shows how using a combination of its traditional roles as “policy shaper” and “government watchdog” (Rozenberg and Hefftler, 2015), the *Riksdag* pursued its defensive approach towards the Conference and its EU reform agenda.

In **Chapter 8**, Alvaro Oleart investigates the Spanish parliamentary field and identifies a paradox regarding the Spanish involvement in CoFoE. Despite the

traditional, pro-EU outlook of the Spanish party system and significant pro-EU civil society activism, he finds limited parliamentary engagement in CoFoE and its follow-up.

In **Chapter 9**, Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Monika Sus investigate the involvement of the German *Bundestag* in the CoFoE, finding strong ownership of the process by the mainstream political parties, who formed a coalition against the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The German *Bundestag* was comfortable in its “guest” role, playing a facilitating, albeit much less ambitious role in the process than some might have expected.

Chapter 10 by Mendeltje van Keulen zooms into the Dutch *Tweede* and *Eerste Kamer* highlighting how they translated their initial reluctance towards CoFoE into assertive involvement in the process, which was marked by watering down too ambitious proposals for EU reform, but also by many parliamentary activities, not least stressing the importance of active citizen participation.

Finally, **Chapter 11** by Gabriele Abels adds the regional parliamentary dimension of CoFoE as an opportunity structure for regional parliamentary activism and for a renewal of long-standing claims for a stronger role of regions. Studying regional parliaments with legislative power, the chapter focuses on the 27 German-speaking parliaments in Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Italy. Abels finds significant activism, albeit to varying degrees. Active engagement by some regional members of parliament and support by the Committee of the Regions (CoR) fostered regional parliamentary activities.

The **Conclusion** brings together the overarching patterns and synthesises the findings from the empirical chapters into a coherent picture of the parliamentary dimension of the CoFoE. It answers the volume’s research questions, while at the same time highlighting case-specific particularities and nuances. We assess to what extent parliamentary actors have used the opportunity structure provided by the CoFoE, and the implications this has for the way we study democracy in the EU. Additionally, we identify open questions and sketch avenues for further research.

Notes

- 1 The European Parliament’s Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) Inter-parliamentary Committee Meeting (ICM), The expectations of national parliaments for the Conference on the Future of Europe, 9 November 2021: https://multimedia.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/afco-icm-the-expectations-of-national-parliaments-for-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe_20211109-0900-COMMITTEE-AFCO (last accessed: 24 March 2024).
- 2 The process of random selection of citizens was conducted by the public opinion polling company KANTAR contracted by the European Commission’s DG Communication.
- 3 For more on the work and composition of the Plenaries: <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/pages/plenary> (last accessed: 24 March 2024).
- 4 For more on the work and composition of thematic Working Groups: <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/pages/working-groups> (last accessed: 24 March 2024).

- 5 For more on the composition of the Executive Board see: <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/pages/executive-board> (last accessed: 24 March 2024).
- 6 European Commission Citizens' Engagement Platform: https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/index_en (last accessed: 24 March 2024).
- 7 A non-paper from May 2022, signed by 13 EU member states stressed that “[w]hile we do not exclude any options at this stage, we do not support unconsidered and premature attempts to launch a process towards Treaty change”, see also www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/a-third-of-eu-countries-oppose-changing-blocs-treaties/ (last accessed: 9 April 2024)

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1 When Parliamentary Representation Meets Citizen Participation

Analysing the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)

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Introduction

This chapter presents the analytical framework to study synergies and legitimacy clashes when parliamentary representation meets citizen participation in European Union (EU) multi-level democracy. The framework we propose in this chapter underlies the empirical analyses of the parliamentary dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) provided in this edited volume but can be applied to other settings of citizen participation in representative democracies more broadly. Rather than thinking in terms of ideal “models of democracy” – representative, participatory, deliberative – we take Warren’s (2017) “problem-based approach” which suggests investing analytical resources in theorising institutional mixes of democratic practices that can maximise a political systems’ ability to satisfy three democratic aims: (1) empower inclusion, (2) form collective agendas, and (3) make collective decisions (see also Blatter and Schulz, 2022). In this vein, we look at the functions EU multi-level democracy should fulfil through the case study of CoFoE to better understand how the representative (parliaments) and participatory (citizens) dimensions can interact in a coherent way.

Departing from a discussion of the EU’s democratic system and the broader challenges to representative democracy in the EU, the chapter revisits the “participatory turn” (Saurugger, 2010) and “citizen turn” (Oleart, 2023) as remedies aimed at curing the ills of representative democracy. We conceive of the CoFoE as an opportunity structure for parliaments – the European Parliament (EP), national parliaments (NPs), and regional parliaments (RPs) – to fulfil some of their core functions in EU governance but also to pursue their EU-oriented policy interests and institutional ambitions. As an unprecedented democratic experiment, we can conceive of the CoFoE as an ideal venue for parliamentary actors to shape EU reform, cooperate with one another, and ultimately re-engage with citizens. Parliaments, so this chapter argues, could be the transmission belts or intermediaries between executive institutions, such as the Commission and national governments in the Council, and citizens across Europe. Challenging the assumption that parliaments

were unitary actors in CoFoE, we zoom into the parliamentary institutions and political parties, conceiving of institutional and individual parliamentary actors as political entrepreneurs who may use the opportunity structure provided to them. Such an approach not only allows us to problematise the institutional design of the Conference in the multi-level context of the EU, but also its dynamics and the way it played out. Crucially, and against the background of the intergovernmental and supranational channels of representation in the EU, we conceptualise the EP as the “host” of the process, and national (regional) parliaments as the “guests” in the process. These labels reflect the institutional and strategic positions they occupied during the CoFoE, shaping patterns of asymmetric parliamentary presence and ownership as well as differentiated engagement *with* and responsiveness *to* the process and its follow-up.

Parliamentary Representation in the EU Multi-level System

The EU is a political system whose “functioning (...) shall be founded on representative democracy” (Article 10.1 TEU). This functioning rests on two channels (Kröger and Friedrich, 2013): the supranational channel of representation, in which “Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament”, and the intergovernmental channel of representation, in which “Member States are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens.” (Article 10.2 TEU). At the EU level, national citizens are represented via their national governments, which are held accountable by their national parliaments. The Lisbon Treaty explicitly recognised national parliaments as vital institutions, for the first time highlighting their responsibility to “contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union” (Article 12 TEU). Nowadays, national parliaments have become “multi-arena players” (Auel and Neuhold, 2017; see also Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2021) that fulfil essential legitimation, representation, and linkage functions in EU multi-level democracy (Kinski, 2021a). The European Parliament directly represents European citizens at the EU level, and we have seen a continuous (self-)empowerment towards co-legislator in EU policy-making, turning it into a “normal parliament in a polity of a different kind” (Ripoll Servent and Roederer-Rynning, 2018, 1). In essence, this parliamentary dimension – which Crum and Fossum (2009) call the “multi-level parliamentary field” (MLPF) – has become ever more important in the EU’s representative democracy. For the purpose of this volume, we therefore consider the EP and the national parliaments as the two central pillars of representative democracy in the EU.

At the same time, the treaties conceive of the EU not only as a system of representative democracy but a participatory system. Article 11.2 TEU stipulates that “[t]he institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society”, and paragraph 4 introduces the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) as an important tool of participatory democracy. While democratic innovations as new mechanisms and processes of public participation in representative democracies, ranging from referendums

to deliberative mini-publics, are flourishing (excellent overview by Elstub and Escobar, 2019 and contributions in Jacquet, Ryan, and van der Does, 2023), the crucial question becomes how these innovations along the participatory dimension link back to the representative (parliamentary) dimension. This is particularly true in the EU political system, where we already have multiple representative modes that are oftentimes “colliding” rather than “cohering” (Lord and Pollak, 2010), and where we see a crisis of representation (Kinski, 2023) that is underlying the EU’s constant state of “polycrisis” (Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan, 2019).

The importance of reconciling participatory and representative channels with one another is widely acknowledged in both theoretical and empirical research on democratic innovations and EU politics alike (e.g., excellent contributions in Jacquet, Ryan, and van der Does, 2023, and in Jancić, 2023; see also Landemore, 2020; Setälä, 2017, Wilker, 2019). As observed by Blatter and Schulz (2022), a focus only on the citizens’ dimension of deliberative *fora* in a multi-level system like the EU would not allow us “to link processes (...) of opinion- and will-formation to processes of decision-making” (737). The latter is directly related to the role of parliaments and political parties as “pluralist intermediary institutions” (ibid.) which not only have a representative mandate, but also the capacity to translate citizens’ preferences into formal policy proposals.

Challenges to Representative Democracy in the EU

As briefly discussed in the Introduction to this edited volume, both at the member state and EU level, representative democracy is under pressure from above and below, and its functioning requires critical assessment (e.g., Kinski, 2023; Kröger and Friedrich, 2012). From above, deep interdependencies and the transnationalisation of issues challenge representative institutions (parliaments) and actors (parties, legislators) to respond to global problems such as economic, migratory, or health crises and the climate emergency. While an increasing number of policy decisions affecting national citizens are negotiated and designed at the supranational level, national members of parliament (MPs) are obliged to take into account the interests of transnational constituencies in the EU in drafting domestic solutions as well as in communicating them (Kinski, 2018; Kinski and Crum, 2020). At the same time, transnationalisation has put direct pressure on domestic parliaments’ and parties’ capacity to deliver adequate solutions to cross-border problems and crises (Bardi, Bartolini, and Trechsel, 2014). EU multi-level democracy must constantly reconcile the mismatch between public power being exercised across national boundaries and the fact that political will-formation, identification, and representation remain firmly anchored at the national level (Crum, 2016).

From below, the diversification of societies poses a challenge to representative democracy. Societal roots of political parties are eroding, we see an increased de-alignment between voters and traditional party families, and radical right populist parties are on the rise (e.g., Brause and Kinski, 2024). Parliaments and parties have lost their monopoly to democratic representation (Urbinati and Warren,

2008) – if they ever had it – and diverse groups are rightly demanding recognition and representation based on shared identities and experiences.

Meanwhile, public opinion surveys indicate that Europeans generally place more trust in the European Parliament than in national parliaments (49% to 33% respectively) (Standard Eurobarometer, 2023). For example, while 52 per cent of Poles trust the EP, only 28 per cent express trust in the domestic *Sejm* and *Senat*. The parliaments of France, Spain, or Slovakia perform even worse, recording trust levels of 23 per cent, 16 per cent and 14 per cent respectively. At the same time, the populist challenge to representative democracy manifests itself in the critique of the political elite's alleged inability to respond to the voters' real needs and interests (Brause and Kinski, 2024). Representative institutions and actors, including parliaments and mainstream parties, are not only criticised for being ineffective, unresponsive, and self-serving, but we increasingly see anti-pluralist challenges to the basic tenets of liberal democracy (see contributions in Crum and Oleart, 2023).

The third challenge to EU multi-level democracy we want to highlight here is that of an asymmetry within the EU's parliamentary dimension itself. In Vivien A. Schmidt's original formulation (2006), the EU system suffered from "politics without policy" at the national level because decisions were increasingly taken, not by national parliaments, but (by national governments) at EU level, and "policy without politics" at EU level because European citizens felt the EP was remote and their voices were unheard. With growing parliamentary empowerment both at national and EU level, and the increased politicisation of EU affairs through the many crises, this characterisation has changed. According to a recent article by Schmidt (2019), we now see "politics against policy" or even "against polity" at the national level, as scepticism towards EU policies, and even the political system, is rising within political parties (e.g., Topaloff, 2017) and their electorates (e.g., Krouwel and Kutyski, 2017). This is, so Schmidt (2019) argues, accompanied by a trend towards "policy with politics" at EU level, where we observe a growing politicisation of areas of EU decision-making that touch upon "core state powers" (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2014). At the same time, we also see an opposing trend of "democracy without politics" at EU level (Oleart, 2023; Oleart and Theuns, 2023) that manifests in depoliticised patterns of policy-making, especially in regulative and technocratic areas.

We started this chapter with the argument that both the EP and NPs are the two main pillars of the EU's multi-level parliamentary field. Against the background of these (de-)politicisation and crisis dynamics, however, their positions within this field are asymmetric. While the EP is the key parliamentary player at EU level, on equal footing with the Council in most policy areas, NPs are indeed increasingly playing the EU multi-level game but remain substitute players. While the Lisbon Treaty, for the first time, granted national parliaments a direct role in the EU legislative process as guardians of the subsidiarity principle, over a decade later the Lisbon provisions have not only proved administratively demanding and politically limited in their effects (Cooper, 2019; de Wilde and Raunio, 2018; Kinski, 2021a), but most of all they have assigned national parliaments a

somehow frustrating position of veto players in the process of European integration (Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2021). At the same time, the vertical links between the represented and the representatives are much “thinner” at the EU level than the national level (Bellamy, 2017). The EP still suffers from the second order nature of its elections (Schmitt and Toygür, 2016), even if the gap seems to be closing (Ehin and Talving, 2021). In any case, national parliaments remain the key representative institutions of the multiple national *demoi* (Nicolaidis, 2013) nested in European democracies.

Participatory Democracy as a Way Out of the Crisis?

In a representative democracy, citizens vote for their representatives in free and fair elections. In a formal sense (Pitkin, 1967), the “representative” in representative democracy refers to chains of delegation and accountability in that representative power is granted for a limited time and there are mechanisms to “throw the rascals out” (Miller and Wattenberg, 1985). Modern representative democracies do not only ensure this public control, but also guarantee political equality and the constitutional protection of individual rights, liberties, and the rule of law (Castiglione and Warren, 2019; Urbinati and Warren, 2008). While elections are central in representative democracy, it is, of course, much more than just elections. Other forms of representation, from descriptive to symbolic (Pitkin, 1967), shape the representative relationship. At the end of the day, substantive representation and responsiveness, but also communication and justification, are essential (Lord, 2013).

So defined, modern representative democracy offers citizens multiple ways to participate beyond elections and outside of political organisations such as parties, ranging from referendums and petitions to mini-publics and participatory budgeting. Theocharis and Van Deth (2018) provide a very useful definition of political participation that captures this wide range of phenomena yet avoids conceptual stretching and overextension. They offer three minimal criteria for political participation: It is a (1) voluntary activity by (2) non-professional actors (as opposed to representatives or lobbyists), located in (3) the “sphere of state/government/politics” (*ibid.*, 68). In a broader definition, they substitute the third criterion to also include activities that do not happen within, but are directed at this institutionalised sphere by addressing shared community problems, for example, forms of protest or Internet campaigns (Wilker, 2019, 6). Importantly, Wilker (2019, 7–8) adds a crucial distinction between those forms of political participation that are prescribed by law, such as petitions, for example, and those additional initiatives by the political system and the administration that voluntarily go beyond what is legally mandated, for example, participatory budgeting, Citizens’ Dialogues, but also, crucially, the Conference on the Future of Europe. In the latter, “political participation of citizens (...) is permitted top-down by the executive or legislature (...)” and “citizens are given the opportunity to participate in non-binding decisions, through which they can directly or indirectly influence political decision-making” (Wilker, 2019, 8, emphasis omitted, translated by the authors).

When the representative system is opened up in such a way to citizen participation, the main question becomes how the two systems, representative and participatory, interlink and how we can connect one to the other in a complementing way so that the parliamentary and citizen dimensions of EU democracy meet, communicate, and interact with each other. Of course, it is too simplistic to say that such participatory and deliberative tools *per se* revive representative systems and “cure” the ills of representative democracy. Instead, it depends on two crucial sets of factors, the institutional design features of such direct participatory and deliberative openings (e.g., Setälä, 2017), and the attitudes towards them, not only of citizens (e.g., Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022; Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016; Vittori, Rojon, and Pilet, 2024), but crucially also of representatives (e.g., Junius et al., 2020; Wilker, 2019).

According to Wilker (2019, 53), we can distinguish the following ideal typical design features of these voluntary, top-down openings of the representative system to citizen participation along four dimensions:

- (1) Which citizens participate? This refers to open formats potentially including all citizens to affected or underrepresented citizens or a representative (random) sample of citizens. This may also include experts.
- (2) How is citizen participation structured? This can range from information and consultation to involvement and (co-)decision.
- (3) What do citizens participate in? This can be restricted to a specific policy field or instrument, may or may not be pre-structured, and may have high or low conflict potential.
- (4) What is the impact of this citizen participation on representative decision-making?

While a broader discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of these different features is beyond the scope of this conceptual chapter (see, e.g., Setälä, 2017), what is important for this edited volume is that CoFoE constituted a particular instance of such a participatory–representative interface offering new opportunities for linking parliaments (both the EP and national ones) with one another and citizens, but also suffering from design flaws and contextual challenges.

CoFoE as an Opportunity Structure for Parliamentary Actors

Against the background of the “neo-institutionalist turn” in political science in general (Hall and Taylor, 1996), and its implications for the study of European integration in particular (Aspinwall and Schneider, 2000, see also Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2010), we understand CoFoE as an institutional and political opportunity structure which enables some actors to exert influence, while constraining the ability of others to pursue their goals (Börzel and Risse, 2000, 6). In that sense, CoFoE shapes actors’ behaviour, while at the same time it is a product of that behaviour. Drawing on Auel’s and Christiansen’s (2015) neo-institutional perspectives on parliaments in EU affairs, we can simultaneously investigate the structure that CoFoE provides,

and the preferences, motivations, and actions of individual MPs and parliamentary party groups. From a rational neo-institutional perspective, this actor behaviour may come in the form of strategic vote-, office-, and policy-seeking incentives (Müller and Strøm, 1999). According to the historical neo-institutional approach to parliaments in EU affairs (e.g., Dimitrakopoulos, 2001), parliamentary actors may show incremental and path-dependent rather than a fundamentally new behaviour in relation to CoFoE. Finally, from a sociological neo-institutional perspective (e.g., Wessels, 2005), more than anything else, parliamentary traditions, cultures, and norms may shape actor behaviour towards CoFoE.

Many of the studies on CoFoE to date have approached it as a structure that may empower societal actors, that is, citizens and civil society, with new opportunities such as access to agenda setting and policy-making, at the same time enabling them, at least to some extent, to circumvent or by-pass national executives (Marks, 1993; Sandholtz, 1996). Our focus in this collected volume is not so much on the societal actors but on the institutional and individual parliamentary actors (parliaments, parliamentary party groups, and individual parliamentarians), how they interacted with one another across levels of governance and with citizens and civil society actors.

In this sense, following Wilker's (2019) conceptualisation of voluntary, top-down participatory formats, CoFoE served as a forum for participation of a randomly selected sample of citizens from all 27 EU member states. This selection was carried out by the independent polling institution Kantar, ensuring representation across various criteria such as gender, age, geographic location, and socio-economic background.

Regarding the structure of participation, those citizens were not only consulted but could directly influence the formulation of final recommendations through a series of deliberations. This process included engagement within Citizens' Panels, comprising exclusively of citizens, as well as debates in the CoFoE Plenary and Working Groups (WG), in which citizens' ambassadors (representatives from the Panels) interacted with parliamentary representatives, that is members of the European, national, and regional parliaments. In principle, the recommendations developed in this process should have been taken into account by EU institutions and followed up in an appropriate way.

The scope and nature of the topics under deliberation in the CoFoE were very broad, covering both policy and polity-related issues relevant for EU citizens (from health and education to single-market competitiveness, the rule of law, and EU legitimacy). Consequently, the potential for conflict among the participants in the deliberations varied depending on the nature of the issue. Some topics, like access to health, were relatively uncontroversial, while others, such as abolishing unanimity in the Council, were more contentious.

Finally, regarding the impact of this participatory exercise on representative decision-making, we observed a divergence of expectations both between parliamentarians and between parliamentarians and citizens. As will be shown in the following chapters, various political and institutional actors held differing views on the purpose of the Conference and its outcomes. Some perceived it primarily as

a consultative exercise, while others saw it as at least a politically binding mechanism for producing policy recommendations, to which EU policy-makers should adhere.

To sum up, we assume that the Conference on the Future of Europe provides an opportunity structure not only for individual citizens but also for intermediary institutions like parliaments and parties to, in principle, not only co-shape future policies, but also the very architecture of transnational rule-making in the EU. This opportunity structure is met with different actor preferences, expectations, and motivations.

Opportunities for the European Parliament–Citizen Connection and Self-empowerment

For the EP, the Conference provides the possibility to shorten its distance to citizens by opening its physical and virtual premises to citizen participation. It gives Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who often grapple with a sense of detachment from citizens in their daily work, and have less direct interaction with them, an opportunity for unmediated, face-to-face exchanges with the public in a very convenient venue: the European Parliament’s Hemicycle. This interaction, and especially the transnational character of the CoFoE deliberations, opens the possibility for citizens to better understand the full scope and implications of EU actions and policies, including their cross-border implications on fellow EU citizens (Kinski and Crum, 2020). CoFoE can make the role of the EP as a co-legislator more tangible, at least for the selected citizens, in addressing some of the crucial, transnational policy problems, potentially increasing the electoral stakes in 2024 and future EP elections.

Besides offering a new venue to forge citizen connection, the CoFoE, given its design and governance structure, also presents the EP with a comfortable position to shape the process and feed policy ideas into plenary deliberations to advance its own preferences with regard to the scope and substance of citizens’ recommendations. We also expect that while some MEPs may want to use the Conference as “an integration moment”, paving the way for further deepening of the EU, others might leverage it to promote a different political vision of a confederal Europe.

Finally, CoFoE may also offer the EP with an opportunity to forge a new alliance with the national parliaments. Why does the EP need such an alliance? Literature shows that cooperation with national parliaments has proved institutionally beneficial for the EP already in the past (Haroche, 2018). In the current EU institutional setting, the support of national chambers, at least their governing majorities, remains a prerequisite for a successful implementation of the reforms proposed by the EP, such as the reform of European electoral law, including the introduction of transnational lists, or the right of initiative for the EP, which would strengthen the EP’s institutional and political standing.

In the long run, the EP needs the “goodwill” of national parliaments for the development of a transnational public sphere and a form of pan-European *demos*. This vision of a multilayered political community with some shared sense of

identity and political belonging cannot successfully materialise without a conscious engagement of the primary *demos* understood as member states' citizens (see also Nicolaïdis, 2012). This process, however, requires transnationalisation of thinking about policies, politics, and a polity, which thinking will not occur without the active role of national politicians and their institutions – national parliaments (Kinski, 2021b; Kinski and Crum, 2020). It is they who, to a large extent, shape the prevailing constitutional narratives, by either juxtaposing the EU and national domains, or treating these domains as complementary realms. For the latter narrative to prevail, the EP needs to convince the primary representative institutions that their cooperation will benefit the whole EU multi-level system of representative democracy.

In this sense, the design of the CoFoE grants European political groups and individual MEPs with favourable conditions to exercise their roles of intermediaries between European bargaining and domestic (national) politics. To illustrate, we could, conceive of pro-EU MEPs who liaise with like-minded national MPs to facilitate agreement between the two levels of governance regarding specific policy or institutional reform objectives.

Opportunities for Domestic Parliaments – A Venue for “Multi-arena Players”

Regarding domestic parliaments, the CoFoE offers those members of national and regional parliaments who had been delegated to the Conference a unique opportunity to perform their representation, linkage, and legitimation functions in a transnational context and beyond domestic arenas. In this sense, representatives of national *demos* cross the national – supranational divide of their daily work to participate in a deliberative process of forming EU policy recommendations with the EP and the citizens. Having the same number of delegates as the EP in the CoFoE Plenary and its thematic Working Groups, national MPs formally enjoy a unique mandate to manage, confront, and channel citizens' claims and recommendations vis-à-vis the European Commission and the Council. For the first time, national MPs have the chance to be directly involved in the agenda-setting process at the EU level. It is also an opportunity for them to further Europeanise their policy portfolios, better understand how the EU policy-making process works, and benefit from EU-oriented expertise provided by experts *in situ*.

Finally, the CoFoE potentially offers national chambers and their MPs an opportunity to engage in constructive inter-parliamentary cooperation with the EP. Why should national parliaments invest in such an inter-parliamentary alliance? First, allying and exchanging with their colleagues from the EP – potentially also across political party groups – could provide members of national and regional parliaments with the necessary information and expertise they oftentimes lack vis-à-vis their executives in EU affairs. Engaging in a meaningful cooperation with the EP, based on information exchange and joint actions in relation to the Commission and Council, could be beneficial for domestic parliaments to authenticate themselves as influential actors in the EU multi-level system. Moreover, contrary to other, existing inter-parliamentary conferences (Cooper, 2019), the CoFoE has

the potential to push forward EU institutional reforms strengthening the role of parliaments in EU governance, which could benefit national chambers. As unconvincing as it might sound for national parliaments, the EP has the capacity to act as a “power multiplier” for them by adding more institutional weight to their own initiatives to bring about institutional and policy changes in the EU.

Consequently, we argue that there are compelling reasons, both strategically and normatively, for parliamentary actors at both levels of EU governance to actively engage in the process of CoFoE and synergise with one another. We therefore conceptualise the Conference as a potential opportunity structure for parliaments and parties to renovate, correct, and find new ways to re-engage with citizens, improve their communication, harness transnational expertise, and further their legitimacy vis-à-vis their electorates in the transnational context of the EU. At the end of the day, CoFoE brings together actors that are usually operating in oftentimes only loosely coupled democratic spaces at the (sub-) national, supranational, and societal levels in a deliberative format that could make a contribution to “transnational mutual recognition” (Nicolaidis, 2013, 351), not only among citizens but crucially also between the two parliamentary pillars of the EU multi-level political system. For these synergies to emerge, however, national parliaments and the EP both need to be on equal footing. Yet, when we look closer at CoFoE’s accessibility to parliaments and its institutional dynamics, we see that the inherent asymmetry in the EU’s two-pillar structure of representative democracy described above has also permeated the Conference setup, potentially leading to legitimacy clashes within and between the two pillars.

“The Host” and “the Guest” Perspectives

While conceptualising the CoFoE as an opportunity structure for the European Parliament and national parliaments to advance their representative, political, and institutional functions – we also acknowledge that the two sides do not enjoy the same status in the process. Their positions were asymmetric, reflecting the asymmetry inherent in the broader EU multi-level parliamentary field (see above in this chapter).

The first asymmetry in parliamentary representation within the Conference process is its specific institutional architecture: CoFoE was a fundamentally EU-steered process in which the EP played a protagonist role. It took the lead of the Conference, maintaining control over its direction throughout the process, hosted all its plenary sessions as well as one session of the Citizens Panels, spearheaded the adoption of the final report, and pushed for its results to lead to a Convention, ultimately aiming for treaty change (Abels, 2023; Ålander, von Ondarza and Russack, 2021, 1; European Parliament, 2022a b; see also Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis in this book). The Commission focused on managing citizen participation, and the Council was the most hesitant, although member states differed in their degrees of reluctance (Abels, 2023; Ålander, von Ondarza, and Russack, 2021, 1).

The role of national parliaments in the process was a matter of controversy from the very beginning. In its formal position on the CoFoE from June 2020 the Council foresaw setting up “a steering group composed of representatives of each institution on an equal footing, as well as the current and incoming COSAC (Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs) rotating presidencies” (Council of the European Union, 2020, 5). COSAC is the most important transnational forum of cooperation among national parliaments in the EU that brings together representatives of parliamentary committees specialised in European affairs. Yet, after consulting with the EP and the Commission, the Council, in its revised position from February 2021, decided to relegate COSAC from a full member of the CoFoE “steering group” to a mere observer affiliated with the renamed Executive Board (Council of the European Union, 2021). In seeking to understand the rationale behind this adjustment, we can identify concerns voiced by the EU institutions that the involvement of additional representatives of national parliaments might unnecessarily complicate the steering of the CoFoE (Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sacriste, 2021). As a consequence, alongside the joint authority of the Presidents of the EP, Commission, and the Council, the Executive Board comprising three representatives from each of these institutions was established to oversee the organisation of the Conference. Representatives of national parliaments from the Presidential Troika of the COSAC acted as observers to the Board’s activities, much like the Committee of the Regions (CoR) (including representatives from subnational legislative assemblies), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and social partners.

The second asymmetry in parliamentary representation within the institutional dynamics of the CoFoE was the exclusion of national MPs from the most crucial parts of the deliberative process. Specifically, national MPs were not invited to observe the four European Citizens’ Panels, which convened during three deliberative sessions. These panels were instrumental in formulating recommendations that later influenced the Conference Plenaries and the final report. This so-called “observer status” was granted to various EU experts, academics as well as to additional MEPs who wanted to follow the citizens’ discussions. Such neglect of national MPs sparked concerns in some national parliaments about the possibility of the Conference’s proceedings to be “hijacked” by the “EU bubble”, or for less popular and controversial ideas to be sidelined during the panels or on the digital platform (see also Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sacriste, 2021).

Taking the abovementioned circumstances into account, we can already see the central institutional position granted to the EP in the CoFoE process. For this reason, apart from conceptualising the Conference as an opportunity structure for parliamentary actors, we also classify the EP as the “host” of the process and national and subnational parliaments as the “guests” in the process. We believe these two labels are justified as they reflect the strategic institutional and political positions the two entities have occupied during the Conference and, in turn, are likely to have influenced parliamentary actors’ engagement and responsiveness to the process.

Parliamentary Actors as Political Entrepreneurs

Having defined the CoFoE as an opportunity structure for parliamentary actors with asymmetric (power) positions in the process, we now turn to the agency of these actors in using this opportunity structure. Parliamentary actors may vary in how active and engaged they are in the Conference, as well as in the time and resources they (can) invest in it. We anticipate the emergence of highly active and influential actors, who will function as so-called political entrepreneurs within the process. In line with the aforementioned neo-institutional approaches, these political entrepreneurs may be driven by a variety of motivations ranging from pushing for policy and polity change as “supranational entrepreneurs” (Moravcsik, 1999, 267) to acting as “disruptive political entrepreneurs” (de Vries and Hobolt, 2020, 20) with the goal to obstruct the process and its outcomes. While we agree with the general sense in the literature that such entrepreneurial activities usually seek to change the status quo rather than preserve it (e.g., Kingdon, 1984), we assume that some entrepreneurs may use CoFoE as an opportunity structure to block potential changes, that is, far-reaching proposals for treaty revisions.

For this edited volume, we follow quite a broad definition of political entrepreneurship as “a manifestation of exceptional agency” (Christopoulos and Ingold, 2011, 37). Political entrepreneurs in the context of CoFoE can be individuals, party groups, or institutions that see CoFoE as an opportunity structure and make use of it to promote and frame new ideas, set the agenda, forge new political coalitions, and influence political outcomes of the Conference. Steering the debate into a particular direction or mobilising other actors to participate more actively in the process requires considerable political entrepreneurship.

Kingdon’s classic definition of policy entrepreneurs (1984) is firmly rooted in the literature on policy change and theories of the policy process (for an excellent overview, see Petridou and Minstrom, 2021, but also Sus, 2021, 2023). Drawing on that literature, but also going beyond it, we see political entrepreneurship occurring at different levels within the CoFoE: Individual MPs and MEPs can become particularly active, visible, and influential in various ways, through shaping the topics discussed within CoFoE, forging inter-parliamentary alliances within and across the two parliamentary pillars, or bringing the CoFoE closer to the citizens. Similarly, political parties and parliamentary party groups may act collectively as issue entrepreneurs that use CoFoE to set the agenda and influence the outcomes of the Conference (Johansson and Raunio, 2022). Finally, parliaments can also be institutional entrepreneurs who may exploit CoFoE as an opportunity structure to fulfil their functions in EU politics, and engage in self-empowerment.

We recognise that not all entrepreneurs are ultimately successful, and their successes may also not always be visible. Our interest lies more in the scope of political entrepreneurship exhibited by parliamentary actors in the transnational context of the Conference, and in the underlying factors which motivate them to invest their time, take risks, and use their political skills and clout to reach their goals.

Conclusion

Against the background of this neo-institutional framework, the following chapters of this book take the “host” (Chapters 2 and 3) or “guest” perspective (Chapters 4 to 11), testing to what extent parliaments, parties, and individual members of parliament as entrepreneurs have in fact used the CoFoE as an opportunity structure. By identifying synergies and legitimacy clashes when parliamentary representation meets citizen participation in CoFoE, the findings presented in this collected volume refine the existing research agenda and explore new avenues for further research on the participatory–representative interface in the European Union.

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Part I

The “Host” Perspective

The second thing is that parliament is in the lead. That we are the representatives of the citizens. We are representing the political landscape of the European Union of today – geographically, politically, from the content point of view. We are representing a Parliament where we really respect the free mandate in a very, very positive sense.

Manfred Weber, Member of the European Parliament (EP) for the European People’s Party Group (EPP), EP representative to the Executive Board of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) at the European Parliament’s plenary debate on its position on the CoFoE, 15 January 2020.

I believe in representative democracy, as my colleague González Pons said before, but I don’t see any contradiction with having a permanent consultation with citizens. As elected representatives, we have to be in touch with ordinary citizens and NGOs every single day, and we also have to do this in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Domènec Ruiz Devesa, Member of the EP for the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Group (S&D), at the European Parliament’s plenary debate on its position on the CoFoE (blue-card answer), 15 January 2020.



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2 Driving Democratic Change?

The European Parliament's Reform Agenda in the Context of the Conference on the Future of Europe

Gilles Pittoors and Silvia Kotanidis

Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) has been an important exercise in European democracy. While in many ways the Conference was the brainchild of French President Emmanuel Macron¹; it was brought to life through the joint effort of the main European Union (EU) institutions – European Commission (EC), the Council, and the European Parliament (EP). Of these, the EP has been the vocal supporter of the Conference. Not only did it act as a host, but it was also the first institution to lay down its vision on how to shape the Conference. In addition, Parliament's leadership, the current EP President, Roberta Metsola, as well as her late predecessor, David Sassoli, enthusiastically embraced the idea of involving the European citizenry more directly in EU politics. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) such as Guy Verhofstadt (Belgium, Renew Europe) and Daniel Freund (Germany, Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA)) continue to stress even today the importance of taking the outcome of the Conference seriously as a way to connect to citizens and boost their support for the EU and European integration. The EP thereby saw the CoFoE as an opportunity to reform the EU, publicly reaffirming its historical role as a leader in EU democratic change (Héritier et al., 2015; Kaiser, Guerrieri, and Ripoll Servent, 2023).

It is important to note, however, that the idea that European integration would or should be based on the principles and practices of mass democracy was not a given. As Bremberg and Norman (2023) argue, “the largely functionalist beginnings of postwar European cooperation were built on the notion that mass democracy was a perilous thing, and its mechanisms easily corrupted and used for sinister ends” (16). Indeed, Conway (2020) presents a thorough account of how “the architects of post-1945 European democracy limited opportunities for popular control of rulers ... at the same time as they enhanced the freedom of action of state officials” (8). This approach was not questioned until the 1960s, when broader societal and generational changes in Western Europe, culminating in the so-called 1968 movement, led to demands for more participatory democracy at national level (Klimke and Scharloth, 2009). It marked the beginning of the evolution from a popular ‘permissive consensus’ on European affairs to a ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). In response, the question of democratisation, also at the European

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level, became more pressing – particularly among MEPs. Overall, while the EP’s explicit support for the CoFoE can be seen in the light of its historical role as entrepreneur of EU democratic reform, it can equally be seen as an attempt to ensure control over this transnational participatory process and to bolster its institutional and political position in the EU.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to assess the EP’s institutional role in the CoFoE, which ideas for EU democratic reform it had, and how it pursued them. The analysis is separated into four sections. First, we review the EP’s historical support for citizens’ involvement in EU politics through representative democracy. We then outline the institutional context in which the CoFoE emerged and the strategic orientations of the different EU institutions in this respect. We subsequently embark on a mapping exercise of the EP’s agenda, priorities, and proposals for EU democratic reform and the extent to which its preferences translated into the outcomes of the CoFoE. Based on the previous two parts and additional interviews, we then assess the EP’s strategy for the Conference, particularly regarding citizen engagement. We aim to evaluate MEPs’ performance as intermediators between citizens and the EU’s executive dimension. Did the EP still play its historical role as driver of reform, and if so, in what ways? The chapter ends with a discussion on the main lessons learned from the CoFoE experience for the future of EU democracy. Overall, building on an analysis of the CoFoE recommendations and EP policy positions, as well as five interviews with CoFoE participants, this chapter contributes to the debate on the role of the EP as an institutional entrepreneur in the EU’s democratisation.

EP’s Traditional Stance on Representative Democracy

The EP has a long tradition of being a vocal supporter of a stronger involvement of Europe’s citizens in the integration project. The 1953 draft Treaty on European Political Community, for example, “firmly established the idea of a directly elected EP, which [was] subsequently included in the European Economic Community (EEC) treaty negotiated during 1956–1957” (Kaiser, Guerrieri, and Ripoll Servent 2023, 2). Building on this, the EP subsequently pushed hard for the election of the EP by direct universal suffrage, which was expected to give it a clear mandate from the European citizenry and turn it into the main European representative body. For instance, the EP’s 1975 resolution on European Union² stated this:

The European Parliament [is] firmly convinced that the progressive achievement of the Union must be based on the active and conscious participation of the peoples, whose interests it must reflect, and that the European Parliament will, therefore, have to take at all times, with the assistance of the national Parliaments, all initiatives likely to foster and ensure such participation.

Despite a sense of disappointment that followed the first European elections in 1979 (Pittoors, 2023a), the EP continued its push for democratic reform, both through small steps of incremental change and grand initiatives. The 1984 draft Treaty on

European Union, for example, was another major effort in democratising European integration, as was the later 2004 Constitutional treaty. While both of these constitutional EP initiatives failed at the time, they nonetheless contributed in important ways to the reform debate in the longer term. They provided blueprints for reform, mobilised like-minded political forces, and inserted ideas into the narrative on European democracy (Kaiser, Guerrieri, and Ripoll Servent, 2023). As such, by acting as main driver for democratic reform, the EP took a leading role in defining how we think and talk about democracy at the European level.

That said, the democratic reforms put forward by the EP were strongly rooted in representative models of democracy. For instance, if in 1975 the EP stated that European integration should be based on “the active and conscious participation of the peoples [of Europe]”,³ this participation was understood in representative terms – that is, through the direct election of the EP. National citizens of the member states were to become European citizens and hold European policy-makers accountable by casting their vote in common European elections and turning the EP into a representative house with a sufficiently strong mandate to both hold the EC to account and counterbalance the Council (Pittoors, 2023b, 2024a). In no way were those original initiatives of the EP directed at the kind of citizen participation and deliberative democracy that the CoFoE represents.

Such election-based calls for stronger citizen involvement in European integration were already present in the 1960s, inspired by concerns about the state of democracy in Europe and the lack of control over executive action at the European level. For instance, Charles McDonald MEP (EPP, Ireland) stated during a 1975 plenary EP debate on European elections that “if the powers of national parliaments are on the decline, they can only be counterbalanced by a minimum effective representation in this [European] Parliament” (Pittoors, 2024a, 6).

Yet, at the same time there is of course also a more realist interpretation of the EP's focus on representative democracy: claiming to be the peoples' representative is a powerful argument for further expanding its institutional powers. Already in its 1975 Report on European Union, the EP argued that it should “participate on at least an equal footing in the legislative process, as is its right as the representative of the peoples of the Union.” Indeed, the gradual expansion of the EP's powers over time went hand in hand with calls for EU democratic reform (Hix and Høyland, 2013; Hérítier et al., 2015; Pittoors, 2024a; Wiesner, 2018). Against this background, the recent shift of EP's support from representative to direct participatory processes should be assessed both in a broader context of the EU ‘participatory turn’ (Saurugger, 2010) followed by the ‘citizen turn’ (Oleart, 2023a), as well as yet another way of enhancing EP's own institutional and political position in the EU.

The CoFoE's Institutional and Strategic Context

Reforming the EU has been an aspiration voiced by some EU institutions, EU circles, and EU thinkers over several years (Kotanidis, 2023). After the last substantial reform that took place with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, the ‘polycrisis’ that affected the EU (financial, migration, Brexit) worked as a catalyst for engaging in

a serious reflection on the future of the EU (Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan, 2019). The debates that ensued tried to address how the EU could improve the way it currently responded to crises and how the institutional set up could be made more efficient. In 2016, the decision of the UK to withdraw from the EU, and the difficult negotiations that followed, added a sense of urgency to this reformist mood. This is why as of 2017 EU institutions and group of member states proposed a series of new initiatives.

On 16 February 2017, the EP issued two ‘twin resolutions’ that set the stage for a concrete discussion on moving ahead with the reform process, reflecting a ‘twin strategy’ of simultaneously suggesting both manageable and massive reforms (Costa, 2021). Most proposals in the first resolution (based on the ‘Bresso-Brok report’⁴), such as making more intensive use of legislative initiative reports, could be implemented immediately without treaty change. The second resolution’s proposals (based on the ‘Verhofstadt report’⁵), however, required deeper reform, such as a fundamental overhaul of the nature of composition of the Commission and increase of Parliament’s powers with respect to the right of legislative initiative and the right of inquire. In the 2019 resolution on the state of the debate on the Future of Europe,⁶ Parliament further considered certain aspects affecting the constitutional life of the EU, such as differentiated integration, the use of qualified majority voting in the Council and the use of *passerelle* clauses, and the possibility to endow Parliament with the right of legislative initiative.

At the same time, the Commission also issued several overarching proposals in its 2017 White Paper on the Future of Europe,⁷ while additional contributions also came from groups of member states, such as the Franco-German Meseberg Declaration of 2018⁸ and Aachen Treaty of 2019⁹. European leaders also participated in spontaneous reflections during debates organised by Parliament, where EU Heads of State or Government were invited to present their vision for the EU and engage with MEPs (Kotanidis & Drachenberg, 2019). The CoFoE fits into this context as a structured and citizen-oriented attempt to bring all these aspirations, marked by different degrees of intensity, together in a constructive way and to produce shared proposals for reforms.

Though the Conference was a project meant to have the common paternity of Parliament, Council, and Commission, from the outset these three institutions expressed different visions on the structure, components, and purpose of the Conference. In a nutshell, Parliament’s approach was rather ambitious, the Commission’s one practical, and Council’s more prudent. For one, the position of Parliament, expressed in a resolution of 15 January 2020,¹⁰ rested on three pillars: a bottom-up approach, synergy between actors, and a commitment to follow-up. Its idea was that proposals for reforms should originate in Citizens’ Agoras, then be conveyed upstream through an inclusive process in which citizens work in synergy with the other participants of the Conference (EU institutions, civil society, national parliaments, local representatives), to be finally followed-up upon with legislative action by the three institutions. Furthermore, the EP – often through some of its more vocal members, such as Guy Verhofstadt – did not shy away from explicitly calling for institutional (and treaty) reform to achieve democratisation.

By contrast, the Commission's approach was more pragmatic. In addition to emphasising the need to establish an inclusive process where all citizens' voices are heard, it suggested leveraging existing consultation mechanisms, enriched by deliberative citizens' panels and new forms of engagement with citizens such as, *inter alia*, the use of a multilingual digital platform. Policy-wise the Commission had in mind a duality of work strands: one concerning discussion about policies that should follow the frame given by the European Council's Strategic Agenda and the Commission's Six Political Priorities; another one concerning institutional reforms, notably the lead candidate process and the electoral reform where the Commission could act only as a broker offering expertise and insights.¹¹

Finally, the Council proposed an inclusive and meaningful reflection on Europe's future¹² leveraging existing citizen's dialogues – therefore without citizens' panels – and other consultation processes, also of a decentralised nature to hear citizens from all Europe. The Council suggested a first implementation of the European Council's strategic Agenda and an inclusive discussion based on a 'policy first' approach, where attention is given also to subsidiarity, proportionality, enforcement of policies, equality between institutions during the Conference. Institutional reforms were however hardly mentioned in the Council's approach.

The Joint Declaration¹³ of March 2021 sealed the position of the three institutions on the structure, governance, purpose, and work methods of the CoFoE. Beyond a detailed description of the Conference's governing bodies, the Joint Declaration established the CoFoE as a citizen-focused and bottom-up exercise where, in addition to decentralised events across the Union and the use of a multilingual digital platform, would be organised European Citizens' Panels representative of the EU population, with a strong presence of young people. The European Citizens' Panels were expected to formulate recommendations to be fed into the work of the CoFoE. The latter would also have a tripartite presidency, that is, it would be placed under the joint authority of the President of the Commission, Parliament, and Council.

The Parliament's position was highly influential in the final set-up of the Conference, especially with regard to the method of involvement of citizens. The EP's idea to introduce a mechanism of participatory democracy was completely new as far as the EU consultation methods were concerned. Citizens' Agoras, as they appeared in Parliament's resolution of January 2020, or citizens' panels as they were called in the Joint Declaration and throughout the Conference, made their way in this EU democratic process and became the cornerstone of this participatory experiment. The four citizens' panels carried out during the Conference produced 178 recommendations.¹⁴ These formed the basis for the discussions within the nine Working Groups that led to the drafting of the final proposals of the Conference (see Introduction by *Borońska-Hryniewiecka, and Kinski* in this book).¹⁵

The EP's Influence on the Agenda and Outcome of the Conference

While the EP's delegation to the CoFoE's Plenary consisted of the same number of members (108) as the delegations of national parliaments, it was only the Parliament that was represented, along with the Commission and the Council, in

the Conference's Executive Board by its Co-Chair, Guy Verhofstadt. He has been one of the MEPs most vocal and supportive of deeper EU institutional reforms, including the treaty changes.¹⁶ The Executive Board included members from both larger and smaller political groups, though the former were full members whereas the latter only had observer status. Moreover, while the aim of including different political groups was to reflect the EP's various political views in the CoFoE Executive Board and Working Groups, several groups on the far left and far right of the political spectrum were highly critical of the CoFoE, with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group even deciding to withdraw from the CoFoE entirely (see Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this book).

Before the start of the Conference, the EP made suggestions for institutional reforms in several resolutions, which can be considered a quite exhaustive overview of Parliament's position on EU reforms. Although it would be imprecise to claim that there was a 'Parliament's position' in the Conference, as MEPs represented their own political views or that of their political groups (see also Chapter 3 by Krotký in this book), it should be possible to analyse if and to what extent, the proposals of reforms contained in the EP's position adopted before the Conference started were ultimately reflected in the Conference's final proposals. These can be found in the CoFoE Final Report, mainly under the title 'European Democracy',¹⁷ that is, proposals 36–40, which contain several implementing measures (for an analysis of these proposals, see Kotanidis, 2022). Some of those measures tackle the EU electoral system and current EU decision making. For example, measure 38(3) proposes to reform the electoral law so that voting conditions are harmonised within the EU with regard to the voting age, date of elections, requirement of eligibility and financing of political parties. This measure also proposes to establish a Union-wide electoral list. Measure 47(2) proposes *inter alia* to discuss the lowering of the voting age to 16 years of age. In the same vein, measure 38(4)(a) proposes a stronger involvement of citizens in the election of the President of the Commission either by direct election or through the implementation of the lead candidate process. Both these measures propose changes on issues on which Parliament has long elaborated (Costa, 2021).

In fact, on the approximation or harmonisation of aspects of the electoral process, Parliament has over time made several proposals (Kotanidis, 2019; Diaz Crego, 2021). The last modifications to the EU electoral act not yet in force as the ratification by all member states is still not completed, is contained in Council Decision 2018/994.¹⁸ In 2022 Parliament made further ambitious proposals to harmonise several aspects of the electoral process, including voting age, the right to stand as a candidate, the introduction of a common electoral day, and common length for the electoral campaign (Diaz Crego, 2022). This proposal also includes the establishment of a Union-wide constituency, a proposal that Parliament has in the past put forward on several occasions, for example in the first and second 'Duff Reports', though neither were ever submitted to vote in plenary.¹⁹ Relying on the lead candidate process for the selection of the Head of the EU's executive has also been a concrete aspiration of Parliament that proposed it in a resolution in 2012,²⁰ while in a decision of 2018,²¹ Parliament fully endorsed and suggested the lead

candidate process. However, in the resolution of 12 December 2023,²² it proposed a slightly nuanced approach than the one adopted in the past, calling for the formalisation of the lead candidate process in an inter-institutional agreement between Parliament and the European Council.

While, as shown above, the CoFoE proposals drew substantially from, or seem to align with, several of the past EP's proposals in electoral matters, there is however no guarantee that the former will provide a decisive push for the adoption of Parliament's most innovative proposals contained in the 2022 proposal for a Council Regulation intended to reform the current electoral rules.²³ As much as the backing of the Conference is a politically positive factor, electoral rules remain a very sensitive and delicate area of law, whose constitutional nature makes it difficult for member states to change them easily. Evidence of this is that several aspects of the electoral reform proposed in 2022 – some of which were proposed also by the CoFoE – remain problematic for member states. In fact, during Council discussion many member states expressed a clear opposition on matters like lowering the voting age, the introduction of postal voting, or the creation of the European Electoral Authority, in addition to the most innovative ones like transnational lists and the creation of a Union-wide constituency.²⁴

The CoFoE also made proposals to modify the EU's decision-making, such as reserving the unanimity principle only for certain cases, such as the admission of new member states (39(1)). In this respect, Parliament has been a steady advocate of shifting to qualified majority vote through the implementation of *passerelle* clauses and for the more widespread use of the ordinary legislative procedure in several fields. In the 2017 resolution based on the 'Verhofstadt Report', Parliament advanced several proposals requiring modifications of the treaties, among which a proposal to expand the areas where Council decides by qualified majority to foreign and defence matters, fiscal affairs, and social policy. A more general call to use *passerelle* clauses was contained in resolution of January 2019 on differentiated integration.²⁵ With references to more specific policy areas, Parliament endorsed *passerelle* clauses for the Multiannual Financial Framework,²⁶ Common Foreign and Security Policy²⁷ and matters which could help to cope with health crises.²⁸ Additionally, the CoFoE proposed to award Parliament the right of legislative initiative, something Parliament has been asking too with a resolution of June 2022²⁹ to align the Parliament's powers to the constitutional set-up of member states whose parliaments are already endowed with that right. In the June 2022 resolution, Parliament asked for the recognition of a generalised right of legislative initiative without excluding a concurrent, or even exclusive, right of initiative in the hands of the Commission.

Some CoFoE proposals focus on making the EU institutional set-up more understandable for citizens and more transparent, for example by changing the name of the Council into the Senate or the Commission's into Executive (proposal 39(3)) or involving national and regional representatives in EU decision-making (39(2)(b)). In all these areas, Parliament also made concrete proposals in the past. In the 2017 resolution based on the 'Verhofstadt report', Parliament proposed to make the Council the second chamber of the EU's legislature, while in the 'twin' resolution based on the 'Bresso-Brok report' it proposed not only that the Council

becomes the second legislative chamber, but also a more transparent decision-making process of Parliament and Council. In the latter resolution, Parliament also encouraged political dialogue with national parliaments on the content of legislative proposals.

The CoFoE made further proposals such as the introduction of an EU-wide referendum to be triggered by Parliament, an idea coming from Parliament as early as 2000.³⁰ Furthermore, it proposed to grant a deeper role to national parliaments in the field of subsidiarity and in particular to endow national parliaments with a ‘green card’ (proposal 40(2)) (i.e., the power to make legislative proposals), something that Parliament suggested already in 2017.³¹ Finally, proposal 39(7) of the CoFoE, aimed to reopen the discussion about the constitution, seems to point to a major reformist moment for the EU, something that Parliament has been awaiting in the last few years.³² This shows just how notable Parliament’s footprint was in those CoFoE proposals most related to the EU’s institutional set-up and decision-making.

Similarly, also in areas such as values and citizens’ democratic participation, it is possible to observe the influence of Parliament’s vision expressed in times preceding the CoFoE. For example, the CoFoE proposals to strengthen the protection of EU values and the rule of law (measures 38(1), 25(1), and 25(2)) have been high on the EP’s agenda for a long time. In 2016³³ and again in 2020³⁴ Parliament supported the strengthening of the establishment of an internal mechanism on democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights with an annual monitoring exercise focused on EU values. In a 2021 resolution,³⁵ Parliament stressed the importance that civil society, national human rights institutions, equality bodies, and other relevant actors participate in all stages of the proposed Annual Monitoring Cycle. The strong support of Parliament for a system that preserves and protects the rule of law is also visible in the steady support that Parliament gave to the establishment of the Conditionality Regulation.³⁶ The Conditionality Regulation’s thorough implementation is the object of measure 25(4), which suggests extending the conditionality mechanism also to other areas even if they require the modification of the treaties.

Finally, when looking at the proposals focussing on increasing and improving the participation of citizens in the EU decision-making, Parliament’s views have exercised a major influence. The many proposed measures aimed at improving the quality and frequency of participatory mechanisms, or at creating new ones (measures 36(1–10)), all reflect a strong ambition of the Parliament to make the EU decision-making more inclusive. In a resolution of July 2021,³⁷ adopted during the Conference, Parliament laid down concrete proposals for Citizens’ Agoras with a possibility to influence the Commission’s Annual Work Programme. Those Citizens’ Agoras would be run at national and regional level in the first months of the year, for feeding into transnational European Citizens’ Agoras, which would conclude on Europe Day (9 May) with the elaboration of priorities to be presented to the EU institutions for being considered in the Commission’s Work Programme. This proposal represents a step up compared to existing or past experiences, as it is not an ad hoc tool, but a permanent mechanism, based on the direct participation

of citizens and not of their intermediaries (e.g., civil society organisations). In addition, the proposed Citizens' Agoras are transnational, not confined only to the local or regional sphere and finally they are interactive, as opposed to unidirectional whereby citizens input is only submitted in the absence of a debate. Past experiences do not appear to have gathered all those characteristics in one single mechanism, as they lacked either transnationality (Citizens' Dialogue), stability and interaction (Have Your Say), or direct involvement of citizens (2007 Agoras convened to give a first appraisal of the Lisbon Treaty where only civil society was involved).

This strong influence of Parliament in terms of content proposal within the Conference is not absolute, as some of Parliament's old proposals remained out of the final recommendations of the Conference. Proposals that did not make it include, for example, making common fiscal and economic policy a shared competence, the reduction of the number of Commissioners and the creation of a single seat for Parliament.³⁸ Importantly, its proposal for the entry into force of treaty changes either by an EU-wide referendum or after ratification by four-fifths of member states, after consent of the European Parliament, was also not included in the Conference's final recommendations. It is not a simple task to identify the reasons why these old ideas of Parliament did not appear in the final proposals of the CoFoE. A few speculations can be put forward. On the one hand, the fact that they do not appear among the Citizens' Panels proposals, not even among those that were "considered by the panel and not adopted" seems to imply that they were not even discussed during the debates of the Citizens' Panels. On the other hand, all those old Parliament proposals do imply a considerable change in the constitutional framework of the EU, including modification of the EU's competences, of the procedure to modify the treaties, or of the composition of institutions. All these issues require a strong reformist attitude.

The above examples, however, show how Parliament was able to decisively influence not only the structure of the CoFoE, but also the content of the final proposals through the debates during the CoFoE's Plenary and in the Working Groups. In this sense, Parliament in fact left a visible footprint on many of the CoFoE recommendations related to the EU reforms and European democracy, including not only institutional matters, but also the respect of EU values and the participation of citizens.

The EP's Role at the CoFoE: Democratic Intermediator and Entrepreneur?

Our analysis of the EP's reform agenda and the eventual outcomes of the Conference has revealed their strong interconnection. In this section, we ask how the EP managed to do this. Which institutional role did the EP take up, and how did it behave during the Conference to secure its impact and maintain its leading position as driver of democratic reform? To what extent did it present itself as the intermediary between citizens and other institutions, or even act as a proactive institutional entrepreneur? To answer this question, we

interviewed five people in total. Four of them were citizens who participated in the Conference and acted as ambassadors of their respective Working Groups (all of them dealing with different topics, such as EU democracy or migration). The fifth person we interviewed was British politician Richard Corbett, former MEP, and member of the Conference's Common Secretariat. These interviews provided a unique insight in the operation of the Conference and the EP's overall engagement in it.

As mentioned earlier, the EP has long since established itself as a driver of EU democratic reform. Over the past decades, it has not shied away from this role, pushing other institutions to strengthen the EU's democratic system. However, as shown in the first section of this chapter, its historical track-record has mostly been aimed at strengthening representative democracy at the European level, rather than promoting direct citizen participation. Nonetheless, we can say that the EP acted as 'first-mover' (Meissner and Schoeller, 2019) when it comes to the CoFoE, and applied a strategy akin to 'shock and awe' to create ownership and mobilise citizen support. By acting early and being publicly supportive of the CoFoE – acting as a host, participating with a large and senior delegation, actively supporting citizens during the process, and issuing a barrage of resolutions and public statements (see above) – the EP aimed to capture the momentum of the CoFoE and create a perception of all-round Parliamentary ownership of the endeavour. In doing so, it wanted to steer the CoFoE in its preferred direction and confirm itself as solid advocate of citizens' interests.

Several of our respondents indicated that, while citizens were left to deliberate free from outside influence during the phase of the citizens panels', many MEPs invested strongly in building rapport with the participating citizens during the Working Group phase of the CoFoE. One respondent participating in the Working Group on Migration said that MEPs were "very engaged" and "endeavoured to reach an understanding and strengthen our position". Another respondent, who participated in the Working Group on Values, was even more explicit:

The Parliament was the only institution that directly talked to us citizens, like during lunch breaks. So, I think the relationship between the citizens and the Parliament was pretty good, positive. [...] They invited us to drink a coffee or to just have a meeting with us where they directly asked us, "what do you think about this and this and how can we make this work?"

Respondents indicated that this support from MEPs was not only necessary for citizens to fulfil their role, but it also established an understanding between Parliament and citizens about common goals and ideas. For one, especially at the beginning of the Conference and before plenary sittings of the Conference itself, MEPs actively encouraged citizens to speak up during debates, even when confronted with well-trained speakers from the EU institutions. As one citizen said, "they supported us in giving us more self-confidence to present our proposals". Several citizens stressed that this was necessary, as they felt very much out of their depth at the beginning of the Conference: "We felt, oops, what shall we do here? The politicians are talking

like in their everyday life. And we felt strange, we were not brave enough to talk". This imbalance in the input from different actors was felt by some MEPs to be detrimental to the purpose of the Conference, triggering them to actively seek out citizens and support them:

Especially in the beginning there was a big problem to have real discussions and to make the citizens talk. So, I think it was about trying to make this work better, to have real discussions, to engage more with the citizens.[...] It was always like, 'how can we support you in your work', and to give you more confidence to also speak up during the meetings or during the Working Groups and in the plenary sessions.

Moreover, through their interaction MEPs and citizens both realised there were many overlapping interests, ideas, and preferences. This in turn provided a basis for a "natural alliance" between citizens and Parliament. As one citizen told us: "Many [citizens' proposals] were the same like [MEPs] already prepared ... and so we could see that maybe we were a chance for them to bring their ideas, bring them through and say, 'Hey, see, the citizens are thinking the same. They want these changes.'" This realisation in turn also generated a relationship of trust between Parliament and citizens, with citizens coming to appreciate how MEPs "just talked to us and, you know, there was just like a trust between the citizens and the EP that it was just working out very well".

This overall approach was confirmed by Corbett, who contended that even though "it wasn't a formal alliance, de facto there was a large measure of agreement" between Parliament and citizens. In fact, Corbett argued that Parliament was confident that "citizens would, once informed, say the same thing [as Parliament]". Parliament assumed that, because it is directly elected by citizens and knows what resonates with them, "it's natural that there is a degree of convergence". Accordingly, a big part of Parliament's strategy for the Conference was precisely to make sure that citizens got their say:

We enabled the citizens to express themselves in full confidence that they would be saying similar things to the Parliament. And basically, we wanted a plenary that enabled them to have their ideas looked at properly and be debated and taken up.

Corbett also considered that this strategy implied that Parliament, unlike Commission or the Council, was confident that in discussions about policies, the issue would emerge of the EU being capable to deliver on those policies, thus bringing into the debate the issue of system change and deeper reforms.

Still, a key element in the success of this strategy was establishing Parliament presence throughout the full duration of the Conference, and explicitly supporting citizens in expressing their views. Corbett described how simply 'being there' inevitably led to interaction with citizens and a growing relationship of trust among them.

We were there. Basically, Parliament's delegation was there throughout. [...] Inevitably you do, you know, you socialise. Sometimes [citizens] ask questions and you know the answer. You're not going to say, "Oh, I'm not allowed to talk to you." So, there is a bit of talking and explaining what works and what doesn't work in the European Union as we see it.

However, there were also voices of criticism pointing to absenteeism of some MEPs and their lack of engagement in the deliberative phase, especially during plenaries. In this context, respondents indicated that there were great differences between the behaviour of individual MEPs. Notably, it was reported in our interviews that some MEPs were openly opposed to the very nature of the Conference, disregarding citizen participation as a legitimate form of democratic politics, or were dismissive of citizens' genuine input. This obviously did not help the EP to establish a constructive relationship with citizens, as it generated frustration among them. As one citizen participating in the Working Group on European Democracy explained, "we never saw [MEPs], so we didn't get into a relation". This hints at the absence of an overall (citizen-oriented) strategy taken by the EP as an institution, and suggests that the decision on how to engage with the Conference and its participants came down to individual MEPs. Another member of the Citizens' Panels mentioned how citizens had to 'gain the respect' of MEPs particularly on content matters as they were not taken seriously by some MEPs, particularly during the initial phase of the Conference.

Despite these shortcomings and justified voices of criticism, it is clear that the EP not only discursively established itself as the citizens' ally, but also that many MEPs acted as such. Before, during, and after the Conference, Parliament actively called attention to the importance of making the Conference a citizen-driven process, and stressed how the Conference also raised certain expectations among European citizens that needed to be met. For instance, in its follow-up resolution on the Conference of 4 May 2022³⁹, Parliament explicitly stated that "in addition to legislative proposals, the opening of a process of institutional reforms is needed in order to implement the recommendations and expectations of the citizens' participation process". In addition, recent EP studies⁴⁰ have shown how Parliament has issued positions on all recommendations coming from the Citizens' Panels, calling for concrete measures and urging the other institutions to take further initiatives. In that sense, by framing the Conference explicitly in terms of citizen preferences and expectations, and afterwards taking clear positions on the citizens' recommendations, the EP took up the role of key intermediary between European citizens and the EU policy process.

Of course, the EP taking up this role was also partly facilitated by the other EU institutions. The Commission's rather technical and legalistic approach to the CoFoE and the Council's hesitance (even reluctance) to go ahead with it offered an important window of opportunity for the EP to fill the leadership vacuum. Respondents largely reported good and frequent contacts with MEPs and less interaction with the other institutions during the CoFoE. Still, many respondents also expressed the feeling that they expected more engagement by Parliament in the

follow-up phase and in keeping the participants of the Citizens' Panels informed on the initiatives taken up by the EU institutions to implement the CoFoE's proposals.

Notwithstanding room for improvement, the EP showed itself a proactive institutional entrepreneur. As argued by DiMaggio (1988), institutional entrepreneurs are "organized actors with sufficient resources" that are able to bring about the emergence of new institutions when they consider them "an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly" (14). On the one hand, our study shows that there is no doubt that the EP saw the CoFoE as a unique opportunity to bolster its self-made identity as the foremost representative of the European citizenry. Its early and ostentatious embrace of the Conference was intended to turn the Conference into a discursive *tour de force* that strengthened both its connection to the citizens it claims to represent, and consequently its position vis-à-vis the other EU institutions.

On the other hand, despite the EP's stated intentions, the CoFoE has been criticised for the lack of public resonance and media attention (Vasques, 2021), indicating a rift between the EP's ambitions and realisations as democratic entrepreneur. Moreover, while the EP was a strong proponent of certain participatory practices, such as the panel idea, it was largely up to the Commission to facilitate their institutionalisation. Indeed, it is the Commission (rather than the EP) that is currently involved in setting up new European Citizens' Panels. One can thus question the EP's success in staying on top of deliberative and participative initiatives in EU decision-making. Indeed, in the aftermath of the CoFoE, the EP seems to have shifted focus to leveraging the citizens' recommendations towards EU democratic and institutional reform – it has made several concrete proposals for treaty change, suggesting over 200 amendments to the existing treaties⁴¹ – rather than developing further practices of citizen participation.

Conclusion: Democracy at Work?

This chapter addressed the role of the EP as an institutional actor in the CoFoE. We started by positioning the EP as a historical driver of democratic reform in the EU, highlighting how its reform efforts were mainly directed towards strengthening representative democracy at the European level, rather than at direct citizen participation. Accordingly, our focus of inquiry was whether Parliament maintained its historical entrepreneurial role also in the context of the CoFoE, and, if so, in what ways it exercised that role.

By outlining the broader institutional context of the CoFoE and the attitudes of different EU institutions (Parliament, but also Commission and Council) towards it, we showed that the EP was highly influential in defining the set-up of the Conference, particularly regarding the method of citizens' involvement. Building on the idea of the Citizens' Agora, which was launched by Parliament's resolution of January 2020, the Conference's Citizens' Panels introduced an entirely new mechanism of participatory democracy in the history of EU consultation methods. Moreover, we have illustrated how Parliament left a decisive mark on several of the Conference's final recommendations related to EU institutional reform

and democracy, including issues such as the respect of EU values and citizens' participation.

We argued that the EP used a 'shock and awe' strategy and acted as a proactive institutional entrepreneur, using the CoFoE as an opportunity structure to strengthen its position as the foremost intermediary between European citizens and EU politics. While the CoFoE has undoubtedly served the EP as a unique opportunity to live up to its self-made identity as prime representative of the European citizenry, it also provided a platform to advance its own ambitions for more political and institutional power. By actively and publicly supporting the CoFoE early on, and consequently pressuring the Council to launch a Convention to discuss EU treaty changes, the EP intended to turn the CoFoE into a discursive *tour de force*, strengthening its position vis-à-vis the citizens and other EU institutions.

Importantly, the experience of the CoFoE shows how representative and participatory ideas and practices of democracy can co-exist at the European level. By embracing initiatives of direct citizen participation in EU politics, the EP has shown how building alliances with citizens directly can be beneficial for EU democratic innovation and reform. While of course there is ample room to improve the functioning of such transnational participatory experiments as the CoFoE (Stratulat et al., 2022), whether this Parliament–citizens alliance will lead to concrete reform or higher turnout in European elections is a question that remains open.

As Oleart (2023a) argued, the CoFoE is part of a broader 'citizen turn' in EU politics, that is, "the political attempt to build a new source of legitimacy that presents an alternative to the traditional conception of the European public sphere, replacing it with 'neutral' minipublics such as the European Citizens' Panels" (11). While the direct involvement of citizens in EU politics can have many positive consequences – not least in fostering a transnational identity – there is a danger that disconnecting citizen participation from democratic politics in a European public sphere is simply another version of Europe's 'democracy without politics' (Oleart, 2023b) that is considered a core element of its perceived democratic deficit. As such, one must be cautious about inflating the democratising quality of such initiatives if they are depoliticised and do not feed into the broader public debate (see also Pittoors, 2024b). The stated criticism of the CoFoE's lack of media attention is a case in point.

This of course connects to a further consideration: will the CoFoE recommendations for EU (democratic) reform be implemented? Parliament has on three occasions⁴² called for the reform of the treaties through a convention. In the more recent resolution of November 2023, Parliament proposed 267 treaty amendments and passed them on to the Council. This resolution stressed that treaty change is not an end in itself, but a bid to improve the enlarged EU's capacity to act and bolster its democratic legitimacy and accountability. However, reforming the treaties is not only a complex endeavour but also a risky one. The requirement of 'double unanimity' among all national governments, followed by an equally challenging ratification process involving the occasional referendum risk aggravating societal and political cleavages. The French and Dutch referendums in 2005, rejecting the EU Constitutional Treaty, are a live example of this dynamic. Yet, the need to reform the EU's architecture might become compelling in view of a future enlargement. In the short run, for the next legislative

term, whether reforms are initiated, and the shape they will take, will depend not only on legitimate worries and resolve of reformists, but also on the extent to which the Eurosceptic forces in the EP, emboldened after the June 2024 European elections, will succeed in shaping the EP's positions.

Notes

- 1 See Macron's letter to European citizens 'For European renewal', 4 March 2019 here: www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal
- 2 European Parliament resolution of 6 August 1975 on European Union (C 179/28), available here: <https://ep-archives-archibot.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/root/vol11/393/N20170118202913937-AA370D1856E04.pdf>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017 on improving the functioning of the European Union building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty (2014/2249(INI)), available here: www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0049_EN.html
- 5 European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017 on possible evolutions of and adjustments to the current institutional set-up of the European Union (2014/2248(INI)), available here: www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0048_EN.html
- 6 European Parliament resolution of 13 February 2019 on the state of the debate on the future of Europe (2018/2094(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0098_EN.pdf
- 7 European Commission White Paper on the Future of Europe - Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025; (COM(2017)2025). Published 1 March 2017, available here: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/content/news/white_paper.html
- 8 Meseberg Declaration - Renewing Europe's promises of security and prosperity, available here: <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2018/06/19/meseberg-declaration-renewing-europes-promises-of-security-and-prosperity>
- 9 Treaty on Franco-German Cooperation and Integration (Aachen Treaty), available here: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/france-and-germany/franco-german-treaty-of-aachen/>
- 10 European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (2019/2990(RSP)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html
- 11 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe, COM(2020) 27, 22 January 2020, available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0027>
- 12 Council, revised position on the Conference on the future of Europe, 3 February 2021, 5911/21, available here: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48588/st_5911_2021_init_en.pdf
- 13 Joint Declaration of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on the Conference on the Future of Europe Engaging with citizens for democracy – Building a more resilient Europe (2021/C 91 I/01), available here: https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/6/EN_-_JOINT_DECLARATION_ON_THE_CONFERENCE_ON_THE_FUTURE_OF_EUROPE.pdf
- 14 For an analysis of the 178 recommendations of the European Citizens' Panels, see the following publications of the European Parliament: European democracy / Values and rights, rule of law, security, EPRS, DGs IPOL and EXPO, February 2022; Climate

- change, environment and health, EPRS, DGs IPOL and EXPO, February 2022; EU in the world/Migration, EPRS, DGs EXPO and IPOL, March 2022; Stronger economy, social justice, jobs, education, culture, sport, digital transformation, DG IPOL, March 2022.
- 15 Conference on the Future of Europe, Report on the final outcome, May 2022, available here: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20220509RES29121/20220509RES29121.pdf>
 - 16 European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017 on possible evolutions of and adjustments to the current institutional set-up of the European Union (2014/2248(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0048_EN.htm
 - 17 Conference on the Future of Europe, Report on the final outcome, May 2022, pp. 79–84, available here: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20220509RES29121/20220509RES29121.pdf>
 - 18 Council Decision 2018/994 of 13 July 2018 amending the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, annexed to Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom of 20 September 1976, available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2018/994/oj>
 - 19 See First Duff Report, available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2011-0176_EN.html?redirect and Second Duff Report, available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2012-0027_EN.html?redirect
 - 20 European Parliament, resolution of 22 November 2012 on the elections to the European Parliament in 2014 (2012/2829(RSP)), available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52012IP0462>
 - 21 European Parliament, decision of 7 February 2018 on the revision of the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission, point 1, available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DP0030>
 - 22 European Parliament resolution of 12 December 2023 on the European Elections 2024 (2023/2016(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0455_EN.html
 - 23 European Parliament legislative resolution of 3 May 2022 on the proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, repealing Council Decision (76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom), available here: [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2020/2220\(INL\) and the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that Decision, available here: \[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0129_EN.html\]\(https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0129_EN.html\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2020/2220(INL) and the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that Decision, available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0129_EN.html)
 - 24 See first state of play of the Swedish Presidency, 10278/2/23 REV 2, 23 June 2023, available here: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10278-2023-REV-2/en/pdf>
 - 25 European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2019 on differentiated integration (2018/2093(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0044_EN.html
 - 26 European Parliament resolution of 14 March 2018 on the next MFF: Preparing the Parliament’s position on the MFF post-2020 (2017/2052(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0075_EN.html
 - 27 Parliament resolution of 13 June 2013 on the 2013 review of the organisation and functioning of the EEAS(2012/2253(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2013-0278_EN.html

- 28 Parliament resolution of 17 April 2020, EU coordinated action to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences(2020/2616(RSP)), available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52020IP0054>
- 29 European Parliament resolution of 9 June 2022 on Parliament's right of initiative (2020/2132(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0242_EN.html
- 30 European Parliament resolution 25 October 2000 on the constitutionalisation of the Treaties (2000/2160(INI)), available here: https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/european_parliament_resolution_on_the_constitutionalisation_of_the_treaties_25_october_2000-en-5da3b66a-3e22-4997-9eed-cde9e4ae5a9d.html
- 31 European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017(2014/2248(INI)), point 60, available here: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_2018.252.01.0201.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2018%3A252%3ATOC
- 32 On the need of a deep revision of the Lisbon Treaty, see European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017 (2014/2248(INI)), available here: https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/european_parliament_resolution_on_the_constitutionalisation_of_the_treaties_25_october_2000-en-5da3b66a-3e22-4997-9eed-cde9e4ae5a9d.html
- 33 European Parliament resolution of 25 October 2016 with recommendations to the Commission on the establishment of an EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights (2015/2254(INL)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0409_EN.html
- 34 European Parliament resolution of 7 October 2020 on the establishment of an EU Mechanism on Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights (2020/2072(INI)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0251_EN.html
- 35 European Parliament resolution of 20 January 2021 on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter – annual report 2019 (2020/2208(INI)), available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021IP0014>
- 36 Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget, available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2020/2092/oj>
- 37 European Parliament resolution of 7 July 2021 on Citizens' dialogues and Citizens' participation in the EU decision-making (2020/2201(INI)), available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021IP0345>
- 38 European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017 on possible evolutions of and adjustments to the current institutional set-up of the European Union (2014/2248(INI)), points 16, 48 and 53, available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0048_EN.html
- 39 European Parliament resolution of 4 May 2022 on the follow up of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2022/2648(RSP)), available here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0141_EN.html
- 40 See the publications mentioned in note 14.
- 41 See European Parliament resolutions of 4 May 2022 (www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220429IPR28227/treaty-review-necessary-to-implement-conference-proposals-parliament-declares), 9 June 2022 (www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0244_EN.html), and 22 November 2023 (www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427_EN.html).
- 42 See previous note.

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3 The European Parliament and the Conference on the Future of Europe

Between Ownership and Diverging Political Visions

Jan Kotýnek Krotký

Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), which lasted from May 2021 to May 2022 represented a novel approach to the functioning of the European Union (EU) by combining for the first-time civic participation and deliberation with representative democracy within the EU. The representative democracy was embodied in the CoFoE by the involvement of the national parliaments and European Parliament (EP). It was the EP that tried to claim ownership over the Conference from the beginning and was the first institution that adopted its formal position offering a comprehensive blueprint for the Conference. However, the EP competed with the Council and the European Commission over the vision and leadership of the Conference (Alemanno, 2020). Ultimately, the CoFoE was steered by a joint presidency and Executive Board led by ‘entrepreneurs’ from all three EU institutions (European Commission, Council, and the EP), as a result of compromise among these entities.

While formal expressions of the EP’s positions in day-to-day EU politics might indicate that it is a unitary actor, we know from the literature that the EP policy-making depends on the “multifaceted internal power struggles *between* and *within* the political groups” (my emphasis, Kantola, Elomäki, and Ahrens 2022). Major parts of the agreements are negotiated between the biggest integrationist political groups, establishing a *cordon sanitaire* to exclude Eurosceptic actors from getting influence on the decision-making process (Brack, 2018; Ripoll Servent and Panning, 2019; Ripoll Servent, 2019). Against this background, the aim of this chapter is to disaggregate and analyse the EP’s involvement in the CoFoE from the perspective of the EP’s constituent parts – political groups. The main question this study poses is whether, and to what extent, we can talk about a homogeneous position, or a unitary actor when we refer to the EP’s position and activity within the CoFoE. It is of special interest to determine how the CoFoE was contested through multifaceted internal power struggles *between* and *within* political groups in the EP. With regard to the CoFoE dynamics, the research to date has focused only on

the three biggest integrationist political groups and has not accounted for the final outcome of the Conference (Johansson and Raunio 2022). In fact, although all political groups initially had welcomed the ambition of achieving a broad citizens' participation throughout the Conference, right wing Eurosceptics represented by Identity and Democracy (ID) and European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) later contested the process, framing it as a 'failure'. ECR even decided to withdraw from the Conference.

Against this background and in light of the ongoing consolidation of Eurosceptic political forces in the EU (Treib, 2021), it seems crucial to also understand their positions towards the Conference and its outcomes in order to meaningfully address their criticism and ensure more sustainable EU reforms. In exploring the divergent positions and visions over the CoFoE the chapter also offers insights into the structure of political contestation *within* political groups. Among other findings, it reveals a relative incoherence of the position towards the CoFoE within the integrationist end of the spectrum, and within the Left.

The findings presented in this chapter capture the period of two years when the EP and its political groups formulated their first and last CoFoE-related resolutions (January 2020–May 2022). The analysis relies on a combination of two methods. First, a qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Schreier, 2014) of various textual sources – including motions for resolutions, plenary debates, and official political group statements – is used to examine the power struggle *between* the EP political groups. Secondly, the contestation *within* the political groups is mainly examined through calculation of the intra-group cohesion (Hix agreement measure) on the adopted resolutions related to the CoFoE.

The following section explains the unveiling political and ideological dynamics within the EP by placing focus on the rise of Euroscepticism and its tendency to (self)-exclude itself from the mainstream day-to-day EP's work. Subsequently, three empirical sections address this study's research question on different analytical levels. The first explores the notion of the *cordon sanitaire* in the context of CoFoE and assesses to what extent it was imposed by third parties and to what amounted to (self)-exclusion practices. Its subsection explores divergent political views and preferences on the CoFoE's aim, structure, and contents. The second section delves into the final assessment of the CoFoE by political groups, exploring the arguments leading to framing of the CoFoE as a 'success' or a 'failure'. The last empirical section explores the intra-group cohesion and dissent *within* each political group concerning the CoFoE. The study finishes with a summary of the findings and suggestions for further research.

Political Divisions in the European Parliament: Euroscepticism On the Rise

The EP might be viewed as a winning institution of the EU integration process, as with every change of the primary law it achieved an increase in its competences (Hix and Høyland, 2013). With the Lisbon Treaty, the EP became co-legislator in most EU policy areas which also acts as a budgetary authority, elects the President

of the Commission on the appointment by the European Council, and approves the Commission as a body. However, the EP's power aspirations are not fulfilled as it still lacks a fully fledged right of legislative initiative and cannot dismiss individual Commissioners. The evidence shows that the EP seeks to have impact on the topics beyond the Lisbon provisions and to obtain informal power in the reform of the Economic and Monetary Union (Schoeller and Héritier, 2019), or in the case of Brexit process (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2023). In this vein, the new EU platform of transnational deliberative democracy provided an excellent opportunity for the EP to exert influence on the EU reform agenda.

However, approaching the EP as a homogeneous institution speaking with a single voice might be misleading and analytically flawed. It is important to observe that the composition of the EP has evolved over the years. The long-lasting traditional 'grand coalition' of the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) has recently shrunk in size and requires new allies – like the liberals from Renew Europe (Renew), to form a majority. As calculated by Treib (2021), the emerging Eurosceptic contestation has become a new standard in the EP with more than 26 percent of the Eurosceptic Members of European Parliament (MEPs) securing seats in 2019 EP elections.

These alterations in the composition of the EP underscore a growing trend of politicisation of the political discourse about the directions of European integration and EU policies (Grande and Hutter, 2016). This process manifests itself in heightened conflicts among those opposing further integration and claiming the return of some competencies back to national states, and those advocating for deeper integration in line with the notion of 'an ever-closer union'. Some scholars contend that this politicisation has reshaped the landscape of political contestation within EU member states by introducing a new transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Additionally, this change has led to shifts from economic to socio-cultural divides that reflect the tensions between supporters of globalisation and open borders and defenders of national sovereignty (Kriesi et al. 2008).

In this vein, Hix, Whitaker, and Zapryanova (2023) found evidence that MEPs' preferences on a range of EU policy issues become correlated more with their socio-cultural orientations than with the traditional economic left-right divide. Moreover, the MEPs preferences are becoming more strongly aligned along a single dimension capturing the economic, socio-cultural, and EU integration issues. Those on the 'left' now endorse interventionist economic policies and liberal socio-cultural stance, while at the same time expressing their support for EU integration. Conversely, those on the 'right' support free-market economic policies, conservative socio-cultural stances, and exhibit less enthusiasm for EU integration. The EPP finds itself positioned towards the middle, serving as the most integrationist entity among the right-leaning political groups. Börzel et al. (2023) found that Eurosceptic contestation is the highest in policy areas touching on distributive, constituent, and cultural issues: "Eurosceptics are likely to contest the Europhile plurality on Constitutional Affairs and inter-institutional policy questions that shape the day-to-day practice and progress of European integration" (1112). From

this perspective, the CoFoE might be considered as shaping both distributive and constituent issues. In the first case, it postulates more socially inclusive, progressive, and redistributive economic governance logic, in the second it proposes to advance new polity dimension within the EU integration process by enhancing deliberative democracy as an agenda setting tool (European Union, 2022). Both of these aspects are likely to be contested by the Eurosceptic camp.

Despite the increasing representation of Eurosceptic MEPs, the literature suggests that they are to a large extent excluded from the political and policy-making structures and processes within the EP. This happens in a two-fold way. On the one hand, these are integrationist groups who decide not to engage in collaboration with Eurosceptics or grant them any authority. Instead, they establish some sort of *cordon sanitaire*. For example, after 2019 EP elections, the integrationist groups excluded Eurosceptics from getting key positions in the new parliament (Ripoll Servent, 2019). The EPP, S&D, and Renew forged an informal agreement that prevented the candidates put forth by the ID group (Italian MEP Mara Bizzotto) and the ECR (Polish MEP Zdzisław Krasnodębski) from securing election as Vice-Presidents. The *cordon sanitaire* is systematically applied to exclude ‘hard’ Eurosceptics, being selective when it comes to ‘soft’ Eurosceptics, as it is case of MEPs coming from the Polish *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* undermining the rule of law in Poland (Ripoll Servent, 2019). ‘Hard’ Euroscepticism refers to the principled opposition towards European political and economic integration, particularly the relinquishment or transfer of powers to EU institutions, along with resistance to a country’s decision to join or maintain its membership in the EU (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004). ‘Soft’ Euroscepticism, conversely, represents a conditional or limited form of resistance towards the EU’s present or anticipated direction, primarily concerning the envisioned expansion of authorities that the EU intends to pursue (Ripoll Servent, 2019). The MEPs perceived as soft Eurosceptics have greater opportunities to engage in decision-making process (trialogues) and influence the EP’s stance (Ripoll Servent and Panning, 2019). On the other hand, as examined by Brack (2018), hard Eurosceptics also self-exclude themselves from the EU political life by intentionally not participating in the day-to-day EP’s work. Instead, they concentrate on the national or local level politics (as absentee actors) or engage in disseminating negative information about European integration, both inside and outside of the EP (acting as public orators). As the process behind non-participation of the hard Eurosceptics on the EP work calls for more scholarly attention, this chapter addresses this aspect by exploring the establishment of a *cordon sanitaire* over the CoFoE.

Apart from the power struggle among EP political groups, the latter ones must also cope with internal divisions (Kantola, Elomäki, and Ahrens, 2022). Being composed of various national delegations all holding certain values and historical traditions, some political groups might expect very low intra-group cohesion in their decision-making. The research shows that this is more pronounced within the Eurosceptic groups rather than the integrationists’ mainstream (Warasin et al., 2019). It is therefore of interest how the CoFoE was contested through these potential divergencies.

Getting the CoFoE Started: The *Cordon Sanitaire* over the Formulation of the EP's Position?

Even before the new Commission was appointed on 27 November 2019, the EP had started working on the structure and organisation of the Conference within the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) (Kotanidis, 2019). Moreover, a Working Group composed of members from each political group and the representative of the AFCO committee (Antonio Tajani from EPP), chaired by the President of the EP, David Sassoli (S&D), was created to define the Parliament's position on CoFoE's structure and organisation. Therefore, it is not surprising that on 15 January 2020 the EP was the first institution to adopt a formal position (resolution) on the CoFoE (European Parliament, 2020a). However, the preparation of the aforementioned resolution was not without contestation among the political groups. Before the final decision was taken, three different motions for resolutions were proposed. The first (European Parliament, 2020b) was prepared and signed by all integrationist political groups (EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens–EFA)). Furthermore, the Left, despite its ambiguous stance on this issue (see more in the last analytical section of this chapter) joined the integrationist groups and together formed a coalition further referred to as the 'CoFoE coalition'. Regardless of their involvement in the Working Group, the ECR and ID (further referred to as the 'CoFoE opposition'), countered the document with their own motions for resolutions (European Parliament, 2020c, 2020d). On behalf of the ECR, the resolution was prepared by Zdzisław Krasnodębski (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*). The ID's resolution was drafted by group of ID MEPs led by Gunnar Beck (*Alternative für Deutschland*). The resolution tabled by Krasnodębski emphasised that the institutions with the greatest democratic legitimacy in the EU are those of the member states and that the European Parliament does not have any kind of unique or special legitimacy on European issues that would justify it taking control of the Conference (European Parliament, 2020c). Ultimately, the resolution prepared by the CoFoE coalition was adopted.

During the plenary debate on 15 January (European Parliament, 2020e), the process of drafting of the joint resolution was labelled as the "tyranny of the majority" by Ryszard Antoni Legutko of the ECR (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*). He argued that the ECR and ID were excluded from the talks, and they questioned the legitimacy of the EP in the CoFoE process, asserting that the leading role should belong to national parliaments:

It is wrong because the whole procedure to produce this document was a disgrace. The AFCO excluded two Groups from serious involvement in drafting its opinion and fixed the voting list in advance. Five Groups prepared the document in secret and excluded two Groups from having any input in the draft text. In case you don't know, ladies and gentlemen, this is foul play. This is the tyranny of the majority. This is foul play. It is wrong because it gives the European Parliament the leading role in the process to the detriment of national

parliaments, and the democratic legitimacy of national parliaments is far, far greater than that of the European Parliament.

(European Parliament, 2020e)

Further, at the same plenary Laura Huhtasaari from ID (*Perussuomalaiset*) labelled the joint resolution preparation as totalitarian practice, in which opposition voices were not taken into account: “Mr President, in totalitarianism you only cooperate with those who agree with you. Our ID group has been ignored in the EU’s position on the future project” (European Parliament, 2020e).

Thus, according to the ECR and ID members, the integrationist groups established a *cordon sanitaire* in order to exclude Eurosceptic and critical voices from the resolution drafting process. However, Sven Simon from EPP (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*) came with another interpretation of the *cordon sanitaire*: “It was your wish to withdraw. Everyone else regretted that. We would have liked to have drafted a cross-party resolution – across all political groups. You have withdrawn. We didn’t exclude anyone” (European Parliament, 2020e).

In June 2020, the EP adopted the second resolution (European Parliament, 2020f), reflecting the new circumstances caused by Covid-19. At that time, only two motions for resolutions were prepared, one by the CoFoE coalition (European Parliament, 2020g), the second by Zdzisław Krasnodębski, the main entrepreneur on behalf of the ECR (European Parliament, 2020h). Again, the document prepared by the CoFoE coalition was adopted. In its view, the pandemic served as a legitimisation to hold the Conference, as it “has made the need to reform the European Union even more apparent, while demonstrating the urgent need for an effective and efficient Union” (European Parliament, 2020g). The CoFoE coalition also used the plenary and the resolution to pressure the Council by stating that the EP “[r]egrets that the Council has not yet adopted a position on the Conference and therefore urges the Council to overcome its differences and promptly come forward with a position on the format and organisation of the Conference” (European Parliament 2020g). On the contrary, the ECR argued for postponing the CoFoE, citing that the public is “focused on the ongoing responses to the Covid-19 crisis, and political attention must be focused on economic and social recovery” (European Parliament, 2020h).

The (self)-exclusion of ID and ECR from the preparation of the joint resolutions indicates a high degree of contestation over the CoFoE. The reasons behind such contestation *between* political groups are further analysed in the following section.

The Aim, Structure and Contents, Political Groups’ Preferences on the CoFoE

Although, as indicated, all political groups were more or less in favour of organising the CoFoE, there was no agreement on its structure, content, or purpose. In order to identify political preferences and the reasons for the contestation, I analysed the groups’ positions on the CoFoE as they are stated in the motions for resolutions

formulated in 2020 by the CoFoE coalition, ECR, and ID. I focused on three main topics: the overall position towards the CoFoE as a participatory tool; preferences regarding the CoFoE Plenary composition; and institutional topics to be deliberated within the CoFoE. For an overview, please see Table 3.1.

From the conducted analysis, it is evident that the CoFoE coalition strongly supported the organisation of the CoFoE or similar participatory tools. They saw it as a mechanism for evaluating the EU and potentially legitimising deeper EU integration, claiming that the

Table 3.1 EP political groups' positions on the CoFoE.

	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Opposition</i>	
	<i>EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens-EFA, the Left</i>	<i>ECR</i>	<i>ID</i>
Overall position towards the CoFoE	Participatory democracy as a tool of EU evaluation (and deeper integration).	Participatory democracy as a tool of EU evaluation and a forum to discuss alternatives to the “traditional federalist orthodoxy”.	A debate is “possible” but direct democracy (referendum) as the most effective, fair and indisputable way of involving the citizens of the member states.
CoFoE Plenary composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The EP with 135 members • Council with 27 members • National parliaments with between two to four members per member state parliament • Commission with three members • The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) with four members each • The EU level social partners with two members per side 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 200 full members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one representative of each member state • 120 parliamentarians nominated by the member states (with national delegations of between two and 15 members) • The EP with 60 members 50 observers with speaking but without voting rights: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27 members of the Commission • The President of the European Council, • 11 nominees from the CoR • 11 nominees from the EESC 	CoFoE Plenary assembly could be composed of one-third representatives from the EP and two-thirds members of national parliaments.

Table 3.1 (Continued)

	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Opposition</i>	<i>ID</i>
	<i>EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens-EFA, the Left</i>	<i>ECR</i>	
Proposed institutional topics for deliberation	The lead candidate system and transnational lists should be considered.	Deliberation of: a) returning some competences to the member states; b) majority voting as a standard procedure in some areas; c) expansion of national veto rights d) the revision of the voting method in the Council; e) invoking the principle of subsidiarity to block specific legislative proposals by means of an effective red card procedure for national parliaments; f) the primacy of EU law over national constitutional law; g) the right of legislative initiative to national parliaments; h) the respective roles and responsibilities of the co-legislators; h) recognition that member states have the right to protect their national traditions, culture and common Christian heritage; i) whether the one-size-fits-all approach to policy-making should be replaced by a more flexible approach.	Reflections should concentrate on mutually beneficial international cooperation rather than on a European federation, as well as on genuine respect for the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, intergovernmental cooperation and a return to a system of unanimous or consensus-based decision-making in the Council.

Source: Author's own.

principle of European integration since the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957, subsequently reconfirmed by all heads of state and government as well as all national parliaments of Member States during each round of successive integration and changes to the treaties, has always been the creation of an ‘ever closer union among the peoples of Europe’.

(European Parliament, 2020b)

Interestingly, the Eurosceptic groups did not outright reject the envisaged deliberative forum. For the ECR, the CoFoE also provided an opportunity to assess the current EU framework and explore alternative perspectives that challenge the mainstream positions of the integrationist groups (European Parliament, 2020c). While the ID group acknowledged that elections and referendums are appropriate mechanisms for expressing popular sovereignty and involving citizens, ID also “welcomed the ambition of achieving broad participation by citizens” (European Parliament, 2020d) throughout the Conference.

In the context of CoFoE structure, it is important to remember that in the CoFoE’s Executive Board, the EP’s delegation consisted of three major political families: EPP represented by the German MEP Manfred Weber, S&D with the Spanish Iratxe García Pérez, and the Renew Europe with the Belgian Guy Verhofstadt. The latter was also the Co-Chair of the Executive Board on behalf of the EP next to the representatives of the Commission and Council. The remaining political groups – ECR, ID, the Greens-EFA, and the Left – had only observer roles in the CoFoE Executive Board. The three largest political groups thus had a greater opportunity to influence the deliberative setting than did the other political groups (see also Johansson and Raunio, 2022). For instance, the CoFoE coalition sought to gain ownership over the CoFoE, which was reflected in the EP’s proposal for the Conference Plenary’s constitution envisaging for itself the same number of representatives (135) in as the combined total of Council (27) and national parliament members (108). In contrast, the ECR and ID favoured the role of national parliamentarians in drafting the CoFoE Plenary composition. It is noteworthy that none of the groups’ suggestions included the representation of citizens or civic society members in the CoFoE Plenary session, reducing citizens’ roles to mere agenda setters for the CoFoE Plenary. Nevertheless, the final composition was a compromise of all the groups’ and other institutions’ views. The EP and national parliaments were represented equally by 108 MEPs and 108 Members of Parliament (MPs) (four from each member state), and the Council was represented by 54 members (Kotanidis and Sabbati 2022). In addition, citizens were represented by 80 European Citizens’ Panel ambassadors, 27 National Citizen’s Panels ambassadors and the President of the European Youth Forum (Kotanidis and Sabbati, 2022).¹

As regards the thematic contents of the CoFoE, despite the voices expressed by various parties from both camps, suggesting that it should not be predefined, the EP political groups put forward the issues that they believed should be deliberated upon. CoFoE coalition mentioned the reform of the EP electoral process suggesting the lead candidate system and transnational list (European Parliament, 2020b). The ECR, on the other hand, presented a broad range of topics for discussion, mainly intergovernmental ideas of granting more power to the member states (European

Parliament, 2020c). Additionally, the Conservatives suggested that the CoFoE could discuss strengthening the role of national parliaments, including invoking a ‘red card’ to halt EU legislation and potentially a ‘green card’ to initiate it (European Parliament, 2020c). Similarly, the ID challenged the supranationalisation of the EU and emphasised the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality (European Parliament 2020d). The CoFoE’s final report (European Union, 2022) includes suggestions from both groups, like the transnational list, lead candidate system, and boosted legislative rights for national parliaments (NPs) and the EP. However, it misses other intergovernmental proposals, like expanding veto rights suggested by the ECR.

From these divergent visions over the CoFoE, it appears that while the CoFoE coalition wished for a Conference in which the EP would play a primary role, the CoFoE opposition aimed for an intergovernmental event led primarily by national parliaments and focused on alternative – ‘Eurorealistic’ – ways of EU functioning. The notion of Eurorealism has its roots in the Prague Declaration of 2009² when the ECR was established and can be defined as “pragmatic, anti-federalist and flexible vision of European integration where the principle of subsidiarity prevails, aiming to reform the current institutional framework to extend the role of national parliaments in the decision-making process” (Leruth, 2017, 50). Although “Eurorealists attempt to distinguish themselves from Eurosceptics” (Leruth 2017, 50), the evidence presented in this chapter shows that the positions of the ID and the ECR were not fundamentally different. The ID seems to have avoided the complete negation that can be inherent to some hard Eurosceptics (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004) and have tried to contribute and participate in the preparation of the Conference. In sum, both camps viewed the CoFoE as an opportunity structure to advance their different, ideologically motivated visions of EU reforms.

Divergent Evaluations of the CoFoE *between* EP Groups

Despite the criticism from the Eurosceptics, all EP political groups and their representatives participated in the CoFoE events. However, in April 2022, just a few days before its conclusion, the ECR announced their withdrawal from the Conference framing it as a failure (ECR, 2022a). The reasons behind this decision, as well as the ways in which other political groups evaluated the CoFoE, are explored in this section. Table 3.2 summarises the evaluation based on the motions for resolutions proposed in 2022 by CoFoE coalition, ECR (spearheaded by Zdzisław Krasnodębski) and ID. Again, the resolution prepared by the CoFoE coalition has been adopted.

Not surprisingly, the CoFoE coalition expressed satisfaction with the Conference, assessing it as

an additional opportunity for the European institutions leading to a comprehensive dialogue between citizens, national parliaments, regional and local authorities, social partners and civil society organisations on the future of the Union.

(European Parliament, 2022a)

Table 3.2 EP political groups' evaluation of the CoFoE.

	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Opposition</i>	
	<i>EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens-EFA, the Left</i>	<i>ECR</i>	<i>ID</i>
Overall evaluation of the CoFoE	Success: innovative and successful participation by European citizens	Failure: top-down down, biased, non-transparent, pre-written process to enhance EU centralisation and federalisation	
Proposed further actions	Legislative proposals based on citizens' recommendations; convening a Convention to activate treaty revision procedure.	Full disclosure of all expenditures made by EU institutions on the Conference; rejection of the CoFoE final report; suspension of the CoFoE follow-up pending a genuine public consultation; serious in-depth opinion polling exercise be undertaken in each member state.	Citizens of the member states to make use of the existing possibilities to complain to their national ombudsmen and the European Ombudsman in order to force EU institutions to comply with the standards of transparency and legitimacy; European Court of Auditors to investigate and report the lack of transparency and budget planning for this event.
Support for institutional changes proposed in the final Report	Enhancing the Inter-parliamentary cooperation; support for continuous participatory tools; abolition of unanimity, legislative initiative for the European Parliament.	-	Welcomes proposal for improving the involvement of and national and regional parliaments in the EU legislative process and enhancing their roles.

Source: Author's own.

The substantial results of this dialogue were also welcomed as they were closely in line with the political orientation of the integrationist groups. For example, Daniel Freund, on behalf of the Greens-EFA (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*), argued in the plenary debate on 2022,

And what did the results show? Well, now it shows that the abolition of national vetoes, transnational lists in the European elections, that real European

citizenship, that investing in Europe's future and not in corrupt autocrats, that a more social, a more transparent Europe is not some federalist conspiracy, but what the majority of citizens want.

(European Parliament, 2022b)

It seems that citizens' participation served as legitimisation of policies promoted by the CoFoE coalition. Interestingly, CoFoE opposition used exactly the same argumentation to delegitimise the CoFoE results. According to Michiel Hoogeveen from the ECR (*JA2I*), the CoFoE was "used to legitimise a predetermined outcome" (European Parliament, 2022b). Such argumentation was further developed in the ECR's own motion for resolution on the follow-up to the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe, tabled by Zdzisław Krasnodębski, in which the group regretted

the fact that the conference process has sadly amounted to little more than an elaborate and expensive method for the Brussels federalist caucus to have a pretext for launching a new round of European centralisation with more money and more powers for the supranational institutions of the European Union; notes that the federalists launched their calls for a new treaty convention to advance their institutional agenda even before the conference process had concluded.

(European Parliament, 2022c)

The ID expressed a similar opinion in their own motion for resolution in May 2022,

[c]ondemns the process of the Conference on the Future of Europe as a whole and its conclusions; considers the Conference as neither democratic, legitimate nor transparent and denounces its conclusions as pre-written and politically oriented; [...] stresses that from the start, the organisers did not seek to generate a genuine debate on Europe but to steer a consultation on the future of the EU by exploring only federalist opinions.

(European Parliament, 2022d)

Furthermore, the CoFoE opposition emphasised the lack of both EU-wide public debate (European Parliament, 2022c) and media attention (European Parliament, 2022c, 2022d) around the Conference, as well as the fact that the selection of participants to the European Citizens' Panels was accused of being "centralised", "left-wing" biased (European Parliament, 2022c) and "self-selection" biased (European Parliament 2022d). These negative evaluations, although coming from the Eurosceptic positions, are serious since they undermine the legitimacy of the whole deliberative process (Landemore, 2020, 105ff). In this context, it is worth stressing that shortcomings, such as lack of media and public attention, problems with citizens selection, or the top-down nature of the process, were also acknowledged by various scholars (Alemanno, 2020; Blokker, 2022; Oleart, 2023).

The perception of the CoFoE as either a success or a failure has been consequently reflected in the follow-up actions proposed by the political groups (see Table 3.2). While the CoFoE coalition proposed convening a Convention to initiate treaty changes, the ECR and ID called for a thorough investigation into the Conference's expenditure (European Parliament, 2022c, 2022d). Additionally, the ECR stated that "it will continue not to participate in planned follow-up activities" (ECR, 2022b) and requested a comprehensive opinion polling, questioning the representativeness of the CoFoE's Citizens' Panels (European Parliament 2022c). However, there have been some notable points of alignment between CoFoE coalition and ID in case of supporting the CoFoE final recommendation to strengthen the roles of national and regional parliaments in the EU legislative process (European Parliament, 2022a, 2022d). Interestingly, the resolution put forth by the CoFoE coalition only mentioned the overall aim to enhance the dialogue and collaboration between national parliaments and the EP, without pointing to the position of NPs and regional parliaments in EU affairs, as the ID did (European Parliament, 2022d). Instead, the CoFoE coalition emphasised the legislative initiative for the EP (European Parliament, 2022a).

Divergent Views on the CoFoE *within* the EP Groups

In this section, I explore the internal divergent views *within* EP political groups by calculating intra-group cohesion in the roll call votes on the resolution on the follow-up to the conclusions of the CoFoE (European Parliament, 2022e) in combination with the QCA. I selected the voting behaviour for four statements within the resolution concerning: (1) the satisfaction with the Conference's proposal; (2) promotion of a right of legislative initiative for the EP; (3) abolition of unanimity in the Council; (4) calls for the convening a Convention. For insights into intra-group cohesion, refer to Figure 3.1.

The findings reveal that the ID and ECR displayed relatively high intra-group cohesion against all the proposals. For the right of legislative initiative for the EP, the ID faced a dispute over whether to vote "no" or "abstain". Further details can be found in the Appendix, Figure 3.2. Conversely, more variations were observed within the CoFoE coalition camp. Solely, the Greens-EFA group expressed satisfaction with all proposals, achieving over 90 percent cohesion in each roll-call vote. The integrationist groups displayed unity in their satisfaction with the Conference, the right of legislative initiative for the EP, and the proposal to convene a Convention, with cohesion levels consistently above 0.8. However, concerning the proposal for the abolition of unanimity in the Council, cohesion dropped below 0.8 for S&D, below 0.7 for Renew, and below 0.5 for EPP. In the latter case, some EPP members not only abstained but also voted against the idea. This divergence signals possible challenges in the future talks on EU reforms in the face of potential enlargement. If the largest integrationist groups in the EP cannot find a common ground on this matter, breaking the deadlock in the European Council could prove exceedingly difficult.

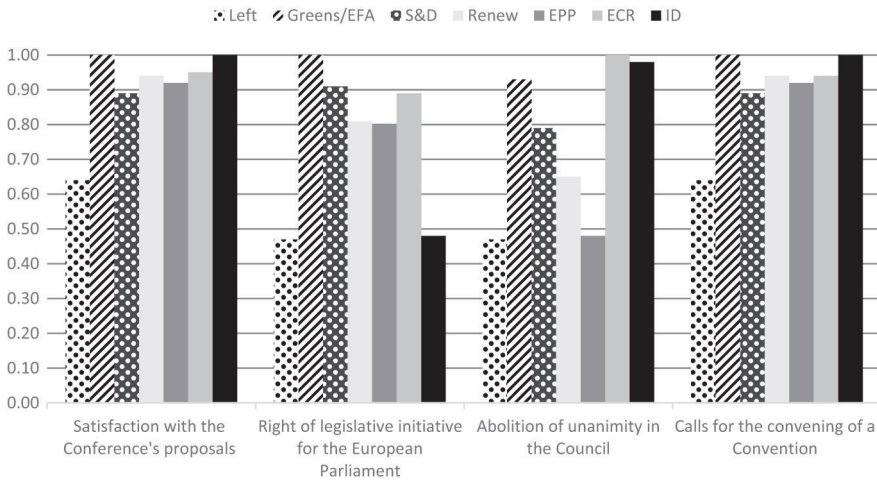


Figure 3.1 Intra-group cohesion on selected statements of the resolution on the follow-up to the CoFoE conclusions.

Source: Author's own.

Although the Left constantly joined and signed all three CoFoE-related motions for resolution prepared between 2020–2022 together with integrationist groups, the calculation of the roll call votes reveals an internal dissent within the group on this issue. The Left demonstrated low cohesion across all four aspects, with 0.67 cohesion on satisfaction with the CoFoE and support for a Convention, and only 0.47 cohesion on abolishing unanimity and support for a legislative initiative for the EP, refer to Figure 3.1.

The QCA of the Left's statements and those of its MEPs may offer insights into this internal dissent. From the outset of the Conference, the Left MEPs voiced some kind of criticism over its organisation. They lamented their observer status in the Executive Board, which they believed biased the consultation process (Left, 2021a). The Left's Co-President, Manon Aubry (*La France Insoumise*), argued for treaty change, as she believed the Conference could otherwise devolve into "a parody of democracy, ignoring the demands of people and civil society, while seeking only to re-legitimize obsolete and failed policies" (Left, 2021b). The Left's support for a treaty change was mainly dictated by their objective to enhancing the regulatory and redistributive capacities of the EU in order to foster European solidarity and social justice within and between member states, which might be labelled as expansionist form of radical left Euroscepticism (Keith, 2017). In other words, they initially perceived CoFoE as an opportunity structure to challenge neoliberal policies pursued by Brussels. Their expectations however did not seem to be fulfilled, since as expressed by another on the Left, João

Ferreira (*Partido Comunista Português*) the CoFoE served to legitimise current policies:

As with the ‘Convention’, the ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’ once again seeks to impose a roadmap and predetermined political objectives, hiding the EU’s responsibilities in the current economic and social situation and aiming to deepen its policies, which are at the root of worsening social inequalities, increasing asymmetries in development and increasing relations of domination versus dependence between countries.

(European Parliament, 2022b)

The internal divisions and dissent within the Left were notably influenced by its generally ambiguous position towards the EU. On the one hand, it criticises the EU political structures and neoliberal policies; on the other, it is in favour of stronger integration in many areas, such as fiscal or environmental policy, in order to offer pan-European solutions to pressing socio-economic problems. This stand corresponds to what de Wilde and Trenz (2012) call Alter-European performance. The Left’s CoFoE-oriented criticism has thus focused on the notion of the EU as an actor incapable of reducing social inequalities. In contrast, the ECR and ID, led by more culturally oriented and sovereigntist motivations, sought to empower the national level further. Consequently, both sides – the Left on one end and the ECR and ID on the other – were disappointed by the outcomes of the CoFoE, albeit for different reasons. Considering the Left’s position and its low intra-group cohesion, the fact that they joined the EP’s resolutions could be seen as a success for the integrationist groups. This move could have potentially bolstered the vision of a united EP, with only right-wing Eurosceptic opposition.

Conclusion

In the context of the unsettled EU polity (de Wilde and Trenz, 2012), the CoFoE represented an opportunity structure for the EP – as an institutional actor – to further bolster its institutional position and influence in EU affairs. Indeed, as shown more in detail by Pittoors and Kotanidis (see Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis in this book), the EP endeavoured to assert its ownership over the CoFoE and advocated for initiatives such as the *Spitzenkandidaten*, transnational party lists, and a fully fledged legislative initiative. This chapter dove into this matter by examining the dynamics *between* and *within* EP party groups, aiming to probe to what extent we can talk about a unitary actor when we refer to the EP’s position and activity within the CoFoE.

The gathered evidence reveals that the image of a united EP falls apart on closer examination. From the outset of the preparation of the EP position on the CoFoE, the ECR and ID were (self)-excluded from the EP’s negotiating position. Although it is not clear whether the integrationist groups purposefully established a *cordon sanitaire*, MEPs from ECR and ID successfully incorporated this notion

into their narrative of how integrationist groups formed an “‘elite cartel’ to help each other hold on to power” (Treib, 2021, 185). As the analysis further revealed, the reasons of the (self)-exclusion stemmed from the divergent political visions over the CoFoE. While the integrationist groups, led by Guy Verhofstadt, sought to gain supranational ownership over the CoFoE, the ECR and ID, praising the role of national parliaments and calling for alternative proposals to the “traditional federalist orthodoxy” (European Parliament, 2020c). While these different visions were motivated by groups’ political attitudes towards the EU rather than by the traditional left–right divide, the Left remained loyal to its social principle and criticised CoFoE for not being ‘orthodox’ enough in its pursuit for more progressive economic policies. The analysis of ECR’s and ID’s stances on the CoFoE final outcome reveal a broader spectrum of criticism, related not only to the purpose of CoFoE, but also to the key features of this deliberative forum, such as lack of transparency, citizens representatives’ selection bias, or the lack of appropriate public attention. As these shortcomings were also acknowledged by various scholars, the constructive criticism by Eurosceptics can indeed hold value.

Since this volume focuses on the full spectrum of parliamentary involvement in the CoFoE, it is important to highlight that the perception of the role of national parliaments in the process, as well as in the EU in general, was a crucial divisive issue among political groups. While the right-wing Eurosceptic groups championed expanded powers of national parliaments as carriers of national sovereignty, the integrationist groups focused on seeking increased powers for the EP, somehow neglecting the role of national chambers – at least at the beginning of the process. This, together with the fact that the Eurosceptics voices were ultimately (self)-excluded from the process, might be some of the reasons why the national and regional parliaments had a relatively lesser influence on the overall process and content of the CoFoE. This finding undermines optimism about the prospective cooperation between the EP and NPs to strengthen representative democracy in the EU.

Finally, the calculation of intra-group cohesion uncovered that even the CoFoE coalition was not entirely united, particularly within the Left and the EPP, when it came to sensitive topics like abolishing unanimity in the Council. The EPP’s incoherence regarding the abolition of unanimity in the Council might be explained by its promotion of relatively mild and gradual integrationist solutions, in contrast to other integrationist groups and federalist perspectives. The Left’s limited cohesion in all evaluated statements is linked to its ambiguous stance towards the EU and its critical perspective on the EU as a promoter of neoliberal policies.

In order to substantiate the abovementioned claims, further qualitative research is required. A thorough analysis of the political discourse regarding the CoFoE could provide more insights into how and why various Eurosceptic groups delegitimised the Conference. Such research could be helpful not only for assessing the feasibility of engaging in a constructive dialogue with these groups, but also for drawing up recommendations for improving the quality and inclusiveness of future deliberative processes at the EU level.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

- 1 The CoFoE Plenary was further composed of representatives of the CoR (18), the EESC (17), the social partners (12), civil society organisations (8), regional and local elected representatives (12), and the European Commission (3) (Kotanidis and Sabbati, 2022).
- 2 See more here: https://ecrgroup.eu/article/the_prague_declaration

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Appendix

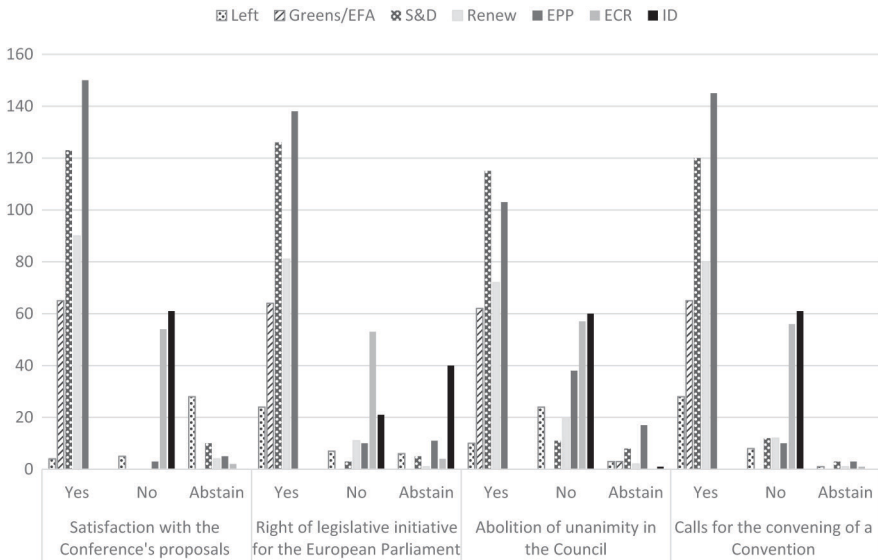


Figure 3.2 Political groups' voting behaviour on the follow-up to the CoFoE conclusions.

Source: Author's own.



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Part II

The “Guest” Perspective

The level of participation has to be increased further and you – members of national parliaments – can help to achieve this by raising awareness and encouraging the holding of events in your constituencies. You all are vital in the chain of the Conference because it does not belong to any one politician or any institution. We must all take responsibility for the entire process. We have to bring the Conference to every city, every town and to every village – from the mountains to the islands. Of course, national parliaments have a crucial role in the Conference and not only through their presence in the Executive Board and the Conference Plenary but also through the events they organise and participate in. The active cooperation of parliamentary committees for European Affairs in collaboration with other relevant committees is essential for promoting the Conference in member states.

Dubravka Šuica, Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, Vice-President of the European Commission (2019–2024), Co-Chair of the Executive Board of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) at the Inter-parliamentary Committee Meeting (ICM) of the Committee for Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), on 9 November 2021, on the expectations of national parliaments for the Conference on the Future of Europe (9:48:15–9:49:18).



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4 *The Portuguese Assembleia da República* in the Conference on the Future of Europe

Setting the Scene for Inter-parliamentary Cooperation

Bruno Dias Pinheiro

Introduction

The idea of convening a Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was initially launched by Ursula von der Leyen, in her first address to the plenary of the European Parliament (EP) in Strasbourg after being elected President of the European Commission on 16 July 2019¹. Despite being announced as an immediate priority, “to start in 2020” (Von der Leyen, 2019, 19), it took more than a year for the three institutions (EP, Council, and the Commission) to overcome their different perspectives on the shape, functioning, purpose, and outcome (Greubel 2020) of the CoFoE and agree on a Joint Declaration (JD) that could formally launch the Conference. In fact, it was only on 10 March 2021 that, under the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the presidents of the three institutions signed this JD, (CoFoE, 2021a) striking a compromise on the Conference’s mandate, set-up, agenda, and principles.

The fact that this occurred during the semester of the Portuguese EU Presidency meant an enhanced responsibility for the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, as the national parliament in charge of the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency. Therefore, it will be argued that the unicameral parliament was not only intensely involved in the works of the CoFoE since its inception, but also played a leading role in the exchange of information amongst the 27 national parliaments, and in the coordination of the inter-parliamentary initiatives. The aim was to be involved in the works of the CoFoE as deeply as possible during the first semester of 2021.

It is worth remembering that, regarding the governance of the CoFoE, the Joint Declaration set up an Executive Board, consisting of an equal representation from the EP, the Council, and the Commission, and in which the Presidential Troika of the COSAC (Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union) would participate as an observer. Established in 1989, COSAC is the longest-standing inter-parliamentary conference responsible for coordinating cooperation between national parliaments and the European Parliament in the field of European Union (EU) affairs. At that time, the Portuguese

parliament held the Presidency of COSAC and therefore took part in the works of the CoFoE Executive Board until 31 December 2021.

In this chapter, three aspects of the *Assembleia da República's* active involvement in CoFoE are addressed:

1. Its leading role within the parliamentary dimension of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council in the first semester of 2021, both as COSAC Presidency and as an observer at the Executive Board of the Conference, alongside the COSAC Presidential Troika.
2. Its membership of the Plenary and the Working Groups within CoFoE.
3. Its organisation of a series of national-level debates on CoFoE, bringing the discussions and topics one step closer to citizens.

This chapter follows a neo-institutionalist approach “which recognises that institutions are not neutral containers fulfilling certain functional needs, but interact with, and are subject to, the behaviour of individuals working with and through them” (Auel and Christiansen, 2015, 264). In line with the analytical framework of the book, CoFoE is understood here as an institutional opportunity structure that national parliamentary actors may use. From the author’s point of view, it is also vitally important to understand the multi-layered environment of inter-parliamentary cooperation related to this opportunity structure, since it encompasses not only the institutional capacities set out by legal and institutional norms, but also takes into account the incentives, peer pressure, and emulation factors that drive individual and collective actors within national parliaments (e.g., Kinski, 2021; Senninger, 2020).

Methodologically, the chapter follows a heuristic and empirical approach based on professional experience to develop a more in-depth knowledge of a scientific area, oriented towards problem-solving and the identification of new patterns of behaviour of the institutional actors who operate in this environment, that is, national parliaments (Auel and Christiansen, 2015). This professional experience has a dual source: on the one hand, the present author directly observed the events described, serving first as the Permanent Representative of the Portuguese parliament to the EU institutions from 2019 to the end of 2021, which included the Portuguese EU Presidency in 2021. The author then served as a Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat from 2022 to 2023, encompassing work for four different presidencies. In both capacities, the author has attended all Plenary sessions and all meetings of the Executive Board of the CoFoE and has participated in all meetings of the Working Group on European Democracy.

This experience has provided an in-depth familiarity and understanding of the various institutional perspectives at play, along with the analysis of the plethora of documents, both public and non-public, discussed within the CoFoE. The timeframe covered is from 2019, when the idea of a CoFoE was initially presented by the President of the European Commission, to January 2024, when the Portuguese parliament adopted its final resolution on the outcome of the Conference. The views

expressed here do not represent any political appreciation of the CoFoE and the proposals put forward.

The chapter finds that the country's Council Presidency and the *Assembleia da República's* COSAC Presidency shaped the parliamentary involvement. The Portuguese parliament showed a high degree of ownership of the process, engaging in various policy-oriented debates and events, ensuring a systematic flow of CoFoE-related information back to parliament and reached out to citizens in cooperation with a network of executive, EU, and civil society partners. It launched a process of inter-parliamentary dialogue with the potential of aiming at a common declaration by all parliamentarians participating at the CoFoE, which was, however, not adopted. For CoFoE as a whole, there was too much time allocated to discussions amongst institutions on the governance structure and internal workings, while the time for the debates on the nine substantive topics was too short.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: The contribution starts by highlighting the role played by the Portuguese parliament, positioned as a 'political and institutional entrepreneur' among national parliaments, as the pioneer Presidency responsible for steering the work at the beginning of the Conference. More specifically, it sheds light on the parliamentary dimension of the Portuguese EU Presidency, during which the CoFoE was launched. Following this, a dedicated section analyses whether CoFoE served as a suitable test case for inter-parliamentary cooperation between national parliaments and the EP, by investigating their activities in the Plenary and the Working Groups within the Conference. The final part discusses the implementation of the CoFoE at the national level in Portugal, namely the organisation of a series of debates with citizens on the topics of the Conference. Throughout this work, emphasis is placed on the high degree of involvement and ownership of the Portuguese parliament in the entire process (on the concept of national parliamentary ownership in EU affairs, see Auel and Höing, 2015). This active role was instrumental in ensuring a level playing field among national parliaments regarding their access to information and possibilities to participate in the Conference.

The Parliamentary Dimension of the Portuguese EU Presidency – Political and Institutional Entrepreneurship

The *Assembleia da República* has certain competences in European matters, as attributed by a specific Law² and by the Portuguese Constitution, namely that the government shall keep the parliament informed, in a timely manner, of the issues and positions to be debated in the European institutions, as well as on the proposals under discussion and the negotiations underway. All relevant documentation should be sent as soon as they are presented or submitted to the Council (Article 5 of the Law). Accordingly, the parliament may pronounce itself on matters pending decision in EU bodies that fall within its reserved legislative responsibility (Article 161(n) of the Constitution) and monitor and assess Portugal's participation in the process of building the EU (Article 163(f) of the Constitution). Moreover, Article 4 of Law no. 43/2006 provides for the means of

political oversight of the government within the scope of the EU, either through debates in committee or in plenary.

The above-mentioned Law also specifies that the parliament might issue an opinion on other initiatives run by European institutions (Article 1-A), in particular on the compliance of EU legislative proposals with the principle of subsidiarity (Article 3). Moreover, and as part of its European role, the *Assembleia da República* holds regular hearings with members of the government, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), Commissioners, civil society, or others to discuss the content of certain European initiatives, thus contributing to the formation of Portugal's position on a wide range of issues.

While scholars attest to the Portuguese parliament's comparatively weaker overall institutional strength in EU affairs (Winzen, 2012; 2022), it is considered very active in using its rights, particularly in the context of the Political Dialogue and the Early Warning Mechanism (EWM) (e.g., Auel, Rozenberg, and Tacea, 2015; Jančić, 2015). Therefore, the involvement of the parliament in the CoFoE should be viewed within its overall committed and active approach to EU affairs and inter-parliamentary cooperation.

For those who, like the author of this article, are involved in the preparatory work regarding the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, namely its parliamentary dimension, it was not self-evident that CoFoE would become such a relevant and politically charged priority during the first semester of 2021. In fact, though negotiations on the Joint Declaration between the three institutions had kicked off on 30 June 2020 and lasted throughout the entire German Presidency of the Council, there was no final deal in sight in January 2021 to provide the CoFoE with a mandate to start its work.

Nevertheless, once the Declaration was adopted in March 2021, the Portuguese parliament found itself in a position to play a role as 'political and institutional entrepreneur' among national parliaments. However, it should be noted that while the Declaration marked a significant breakthrough in resolving the deadlock on the core principles of the 'how' and 'what' of CoFoE, it intentionally remained vague regarding the details of its governing structure and proceedings. The specifics of the functioning of the CoFoE were left to be discussed and agreed upon by the Executive Board, which was tasked with taking decisions by consensus (of the effective members) regarding the work of the Conference, its processes, and events. It also oversaw the progress and preparation of Plenary meetings, including citizens' input and their follow-up.

The purpose of this chapter is not to explore the long-lasting inter-institutional disputes that characterised CoFoE until the very end of its proceedings. However, it is worth highlighting that the Joint Declaration stated the following:

A Conference Plenary will ensure that the recommendations from the national and European citizens' panels, grouped by themes, are debated [that it would] meet at least every six months and be composed of representatives from the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission,

as well as representatives from all national parliaments, on an equal footing and citizens.

(CoFoE, 2021a, 3)

Therefore, the document identified the so-called components of the Plenary without specifying the number of representatives from each of them that could in fact take part in the Plenary – a question of paramount importance in politics. With this in mind, national parliaments sought to set the scene regarding their envisaged role in CoFoE early on, leveraging COSAC, the best known and established inter-parliamentary conference format. The role of COSAC was recognised by the three institutions themselves while drafting the Joint Declaration, since they attributed to the COSAC Presidential Troika the task of representing national parliaments in the Executive Board as an observer. On 30 November 2020, during the German Presidency of COSAC, 34 parliamentary chambers signed a letter addressed to the Presidents of the EP, the European Commission, the European Council, and the Council of the EU (COSAC, 2020). In this letter, they reiterated their desire for an appropriate involvement of national parliaments in the CoFoE and its different fora. They also reaffirmed “that the national parliaments should ideally be involved on an equal footing with the European Parliament in the organisation of the Conference, in its steering committee and in drawing up conclusions.” (COSAC, 2020, 1), emphasising that they “best represent the composition of the population as assemblies of directly elected representatives [and] will play a key role in implementing the results of the Conference” (COSAC, 2020, 1–2). For that reason, once the CoFoE was established, the expectations were already quite high concerning the involvement of national parliaments.

The position of the Portuguese parliament, adopted ahead of the formal beginning of the CoFoE advocated for an enhanced role for national parliaments. In a resolution passed in February 2021 in the plenary (*Assembleia da República*, 2021a), the *Assembleia da República* had three main requests: It demanded adequate participation of national parliamentary representatives in all CoFoE activities and that they, through the COSAC Presidential Troika be granted a status on the CoFoE Executive Board allowing active involvement in debates, including the right to make proposals. Moreover, the resolution requested to make this position known to the Commission, Council, EP, and the COSAC.

Therefore, the Portuguese parliament and, more concretely, the Chair of its European Affairs Committee (EAC), Luís Capoulas Santos, played a decisive role as ‘political and institutional entrepreneur’ among national parliaments, namely in his capacity as COSAC President in office in March 2021. It should be emphasised that Chair Capoulas Santos’s political leadership played a key role in establishing effective communication with all national parliaments about the initial steps in setting up the CoFoE. The 39 parliamentary chambers represented at COSAC had the chance to express their views and concerns regarding the setup, working methods, and potential outcomes of the CoFoE, despite having differing perspectives on the topics to be discussed. Capoulas Santos’ leadership stemmed

naturally from his personal and political characteristics, as well as his extensive experience as a member of parliament (MP), Minister, and MEP. This career background allowed for a level-headed and inclusive approach to the discussions, which gained the respect of all delegations involved. This was evident during the feedback event on CoFoE held on 1 December 2022, where Capoulas Santos was selected to speak on behalf of national parliaments, underscoring his recognised role even during the Czech Presidency. This demonstrated both political leadership, to steer the dialogue between diverging views, and institutional entrepreneurship, since he was the first MP to assume the COSAC Presidency when CoFoE was launched.

Having worked closely with Capoulas Santos during this period, I saw him operate under two key assumptions. First, that expectations of national parliaments regarding the CoFoE were, in general, very high. This applied to both those with more ambition regarding the outcome of the Conference and those more reluctant. Either way, it was a politically significant event that could not be ignored. Second, he was aware that defining the role of national parliaments in the CoFoE required something that the COSAC Presidency did not have – a mandate to act and speak on behalf of national parliaments as a collective entity. Contrary to the other three institutions, which had adopted their positions and mandates ahead of the negotiations on the Joint Declaration³, there was no initial common position or mandate adopted by national parliaments (NPs) that could guide the Presidency with regard to concrete governance set-up of the CoFoE. This should be seen as natural and unsurprising as it corresponds to one of the key-pillars of inter-parliamentary cooperation: it is meant to promote the exchange of information and best practice between national parliaments and the EP, and it shall not bind either side and shall not prejudice their positions on any matter. These principles are enshrined in the rules of any inter-parliamentary conference and are also mentioned in Article 10 of Protocol (No 1) on the role of national parliaments in the EU of the Lisbon Treaty. Neglecting them while leading any inter-parliamentary event would be a recipe for failure. Therefore, the task ahead of the COSAC Presidency was two-fold: ensuring that the COSAC Presidential Troika played an active role in the Executive Board of the CoFoE and guaranteeing equal access to information for all national parliaments, whether part of the Troika or not, regarding the discussions within the CoFoE Executive Board.

During the period under analysis, the Portuguese parliament attended five meetings of the CoFoE Executive Board⁴. The first meetings, namely the ones that preceded the first Plenary (held on 9 May), were very important, as they were dedicated to establishing the working methods of the Plenary as well as the Working Groups (not envisaged originally in the Joint Declaration), and the *modus operandi* regarding the results of the CoFoE and its follow-up.

From the beginning, and with regard to the capacity of the COSAC Presidency, Capoulas Santos aimed to strike a balance between clearly defining the role of the COSAC Presidential Troika as an observer on the CoFoE Executive Board that emphasises its function as a facilitator among national parliaments, and maintaining Troika members' alignment with this approach.

He also worked to ensure a real-time flow of information to all parliaments regarding the CoFoE Executive Board's proceedings and gathered input and feedback from national chambers on matters under discussion, particularly the working methods and potential outcomes of CoFoE. For that reason, immediately after the inaugural meeting of the Executive Board on 24 March 2021, Chair Capoulas Santos sent a letter to all the COSAC Chairpersons, informing them of that constitutive meeting of the CoFoE Executive Board, its agenda and main points discussed. In the letter, he reassured them that the

COSAC Presidency is committed to actively participate in the Executive Board and, together with the other national Parliaments of the Troika, consequently maintain a regular and substantial exchange of information with the COSAC members on the Board activities, in a transparent and constructive manner.

(Capoulas Santos, 2021)

An informal videoconference was held on 6 April, paving the way for an in-depth exchange amongst COSAC Chairpersons on the initial steps of the CoFoE and the proposals to be tabled by the CoFoE Executive Board.

Moreover, and bearing in mind the importance of timely and effective coordination within the COSAC Troika, Capoulas Santos had previously convened a meeting of the national parliaments of the Troika (Germany and Slovenia) for 30 March to outline its approach regarding the role of the Troika in the CoFoE Executive Board. On that occasion, the COSAC Presidency suggested the following procedure in order to exchange information and coordinate positions with other national parliaments. They suggested convening a meeting with the national parliaments (COSAC Chairpersons) prior to the CoFoE Executive Board meetings to update them on the next steps. Additionally, they would send a letter immediately after each CoFoE Executive Board meeting to the national parliaments to inform them of the discussions and decisions adopted. Consequently, during the period in which the Portuguese parliament held the Presidency, this approach was implemented for each of the five CoFoE Executive Board meetings that took place in that time.

Overall, this was an innovative way of promoting inter-parliamentary cooperation, engaging in a horizontal (within the COSAC Troika) and, to some extent, vertical (towards the other national parliaments and *vis-à-vis* the other CoFoE members) exchange to foster the role of the parliamentary component in this exercise. Regardless of the different institutional perspectives, political opinions, and party alliances, this has produced some tangible results by ensuring a level-playing field amongst parliaments in their access to information and their capacity to express their views. Two concrete outcomes stand out: during the discussion on the working methods of the CoFoE, the COSAC Troika put forward a proposal to the three Co-Chairs of the Executive Board on the role of national parliaments as observers in the CoFoE Executive Board and the composition of the Plenary and Working Groups. This was an important way of influencing the course of events, since the majority of these proposals were included in the Rules of Procedure of

CoFoE, adopted on 9 May 2021. In particular, the proposal postulated that MPs shall be represented in an equal number to MEPs in the Conference, including in its Working Groups, as well as enjoy equal rights with the representatives of the EU institutions and member states in the Conference Plenary and its Working Groups.

Attempts at Forging a Common Inter-parliamentary Position within the CoFoE

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a good test case for inter-parliamentary cooperation, not only among national parliaments, but also, and maybe even more importantly, between the parliaments and the EP. As mentioned above, the Conference Plenary was composed of 108 MEPs, 54 delegates from the Council, and 3 from the European Commission, as well as 108 representatives from all national parliaments on an equal footing, and citizens. Moreover, the Rules of Procedure also stated that the Co-Chairs would propose to the Plenary the establishment of thematic Working Groups (for an overview of the WGs, see CoFoE 2023) to deal with the different proposals in detail, an idea strongly advocated for by the EP, even if it was not foreseen by the Joint Declaration.

The proposal of having 108 MPs and 108 MEPs was not the initial basis for discussions on the composition of the Plenary. It was only due to the collective pressure of both national parliaments and the EP that this composition was ultimately achieved. As we can read from a press release from 29 April 2021 by the Chairs of the EU committees of the German *Bundestag* and the French National Assembly, they “support the European Parliament in its ambitious approach so that the Conference has a strong parliamentary dimension with 108 representatives for the European Parliament and national parliaments respectively.” (CoFoE, 2021b)

As underlined in the Introduction to this book, having 216 parliamentarians as members of the CoFoE Plenary⁵ gave it, at least on paper, a salient parliamentary dimension that could voice and advocate for a strengthening of the democratic principles of the EU from those who could be perceived as being closer to the citizens. It also provided an opportunity to build a unified parliamentary front to that effect, by ideally joining efforts of the two parliamentary components that could persuade the other institutions to align with some of their proposals. In this regard, the EP consistently took a more assertive stance on concrete proposals, as evident in its resolution on the outcome of the CoFoE adopted on 4 May 2022 (European Parliament, 2022a). The resolution acknowledged that its proposals required treaty change (European Parliament 2022b) and called for a convention in line with Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).

When it came to national parliaments, some of the ideas and proposals were made available on IPEX⁶ and a more detailed overview on their positions was collected in the 38th Bi-annual Report of COSAC (see Chapter 6 by Grinc in this book; COSAC 2022a). Updating and supplementing the analyses made in the 36th and 37th reports, the first chapter examined the participation of parliaments/chambers in the works of the CoFoE. However, the initial indications regarding the stance of the EP delegation on the involvement of national parliaments in the

process did not make for an optimistic start to this alliance. When the CoFoE was first discussed at the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) of the EP, on 12 November 2019 (European Parliament, 2019), Guy Verhofstadt, the Co-Chair of the EP in the CoFoE Executive Board, mentioned that he had a “question mark” on the role of national parliaments in the CoFoE. He continued that the EP should be “aware” and “very careful” with this, namely to come up with a formula that would prevent them (national parliaments) from “taking over the CoFoE, as it was [...] the case with the European Convention”. He added that the EP should work with national parliaments but cautioned that, if “we say that all national parliaments should be in the Conference, we could be blocking our own exercise from the beginning”.

However, when the Joint Declaration was signed and the CoFoE Executive Board started to operate, Verhofstadt saw the opportunity that a united parliamentary front at the CoFoE could serve to advance some crucial proposals, namely on institutional reforms that would strengthen the role of parliaments in the EU. Therefore, he took the lead and immediately reached out to the COSAC Troika for several bilateral meetings on the margins of the meetings of the Executive Board to exchange views on the envisaged Rules of Procedure and the setting up of Working Groups (with two of them to be chaired by national parliaments). This process of consultations and exchange between the EP and national parliaments began during the Portuguese Presidency and lasted almost until the end of CoFoE.

This is worth mentioning to illustrate Verhofstadt’s role as a ‘political entrepreneur’, taking the initiative of launching a political process aimed at building confidence and a working atmosphere that could potentially benefit the outcome of the CoFoE with a parliamentary position. This was based on the assumption that both the EP’s and national parliament’s respective positions and goals could be mutually reinforced if a common stance was put forward during the CoFoE.

For that matter, it is worth mentioning the sequence of this process, since it shows an interesting insight on how attempts were made to put forward the notion of a parliamentary component of the CoFoE. On 9 February 2022, during the French Presidency, the EP hosted the first joint meeting of MEPs and MPs participating in the CoFoE. The purpose of the meeting was “to foster closer collaboration between MEPs and MPs, and to take stock of the recent Conference Plenary session that considered the recommendations from two European Citizens’ Panels and National Panels.” (European Parliament, 2022c). Informally, the objective of this closer collaboration was to achieve a joint statement of the parliamentary dimension of the CoFoE.

The second meeting of the two parliamentary components was scheduled for 24 March 2022 to discuss and endorse this common position. Its draft⁷, prepared by the parliamentary dimension of the French Presidency and the EP delegation to CoFoE, stated that strong parliaments are at the heart of every democracy and as the only institutions directly elected by the people, they are irreplaceable for the democratic legitimacy of all political and legislative processes. The document stressed a natural alliance between EP and national parliaments in enhancing transparency of the working methods and decision-making processes of the

EU institutions. Consequently, a set of very concrete proposals was put forward with regard to what the co-proponents assumed was, the core of the interests of parliaments. Under the heading, “Strengthening democracy within Europe”, the draft mentioned that the EP and national parliaments “should explore ways to enhance European democracy, namely through increasing legislative powers of parliaments [...] empowering the European elections and increasing efficient EU decision making.” The document then listed a set of concrete proposals for the CoFoE such as the following:

- facilitating the subsidiarity check by national parliaments;
- the right of legislative initiative for the European Parliament;
- endowing national parliaments with a green card to propose initiatives to the European level, and by written questions to the EU institutions;
- reform of the Electoral Law for the elections to the European Parliament;
- designation of the Commission President through the *Spitzenkandidaten* process as the heads of transnational lists, in which a part of the MEPs would be elected;
- increasing transparency of the decision-making in the Council and trilogue negotiations;
- abolishing unanimity in some areas, and reducing it in others;
- stronger synergy between the EP and national parliaments in monitoring the implementation of EU legislation;
- better oversight of the European Semester and budgetary calendars at national and European level;
- merging roles of the President of the European Council and the European Commission.

It also identified common policy priorities that warrant stronger cooperation of the national parliaments and the EP, such as the Common Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, a real common economic and fiscal policy, an Energy Union to guarantee energy independence, Common Migration Policy, improving the European Trade Policy, the extension of EU competences in areas such as Health, and the Protection of EU values.

The chapter does not explore why the draft declaration of the ‘parliamentary component’ of CoFoE was not endorsed and never saw the light of day (see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book). It suffices to (re-)state the fact that neither the Portuguese Presidency nor the COSAC Troika had a mandate to collectively act and speak on behalf of national parliaments within CoFoE. This illustrates the different strategic, institutional, and political positions the two sets of institutions occupied within CoFoE as host and guests, respectively. The EP had a very concrete and targeted agenda of what it wanted to achieve as an outcome of the Conference, whereas the approach of national parliaments was nuanced and fragmented, as evidenced by the 38th Bi-annual Report mentioned earlier (COSAC, 2022a). Similar problems with finding a common position, this time involving the EP, were also encountered by the French Presidency during the

works of the COSAC Working Group on the role of national parliaments in the EU in 2022 (see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book; COSAC 2022b).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, all the proposals developed in the inter-parliamentary fora merit a more detailed analysis which could be the starting point of future academic work. Many of those also had an impact on the national debates organised by several parliaments. We will highlight the Portuguese example in the next section.

Reaching Out to Citizens

The delegation of the Portuguese parliament to the CoFoE was composed of Members of its EAC, namely its Chair (Capoulas Santos), and one representative from each of the remaining largest political groups of the European Parliament at the time. Despite their political differences – one delegate from Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), one from European People’s Party (EPP) and two from the Left (GUE/NGL), respectively – (see Table 4.1). The delegation was mostly concerned about the substance of the debates that the CoFoE could entail and actively participated in more than 95 per cent of the Plenary and Working Group meetings.

From the debates held at committee level and from parliamentary documents made available at the time, it can be argued that there were three main concerns shared by the Portuguese delegation to the CoFoE. First, the delegation was

Table 4.1 CoFoE Plenary members from the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
Lúis Capoulas Santos	EAC Chair	Migration	PS	S&D
Paulo Moniz	EAC Vice-Chair	Digital Transformation	PSD	EPP
Fabiola Cardoso* (until 31 March 2022)		Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport		GUE/NGL
Bruno Dias* (until 31 March 2022)		European Democracy		GUE/NGL
Rosário Gambôa (since 1 April 2022)		European Democracy		S&D
Isabel Meirelles (since 1 April 2022)		Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport		EPP

Source: Author’s own.

*replaced after the 2022 legislative elections

concerned about the extent to which CoFoE would be a ‘policy first’ exercise in the sense that the debates should be about content, about the political options and the proposals coming from the citizens, without any predetermined outcome on institutional matters. Second, they stressed the importance of internal communication, that is, within the Portuguese parliament, disseminating the information about the CoFoE beyond the EAC. Finally, they emphasised the importance of external communication, intending to bring the debates about the topics discussed at the CoFoE closer to the citizens, including schools and universities.

Against this background, the approach taken aimed to foster critical thinking about the various proposals and topics among the parliamentary committees and political groups, irrespective of their differences. Therefore, the members of the delegation of the *Assembleia da República* to the CoFoE developed the practice of informing the EAC on the activities and the conclusions of the plenary sessions. Moreover, after their participation in these meetings, a report was prepared and approved by all the members of the delegation and sent to the President of the Parliament, who determined its publication in the Official Journal and its dissemination to all the political groups and parliamentary committees. Hence, the flow of information about the activities within CoFoE was not limited to those attending the meetings but made available to all Members of Parliament in real time. This signals some kind of mainstreaming of the Conference into wider parliamentary practice (on the concept of mainstreaming of EU affairs, see Högenauer, 2021).

With regard to the external dimension of the CoFoE, the Portuguese parliament seized the opportunity to organise events at the national and regional level under the umbrella of the Conference and in line with the Conference Charter, with a view to reaching the widest possible audience. In fact, Portugal was quite a unique case of inter-institutional engagement to bring the CoFoE to the grassroots level. In particular, the Portuguese *Assembleia da República* was part of an institutional partnership with the government, the European Parliament (Liaison Office in Portugal), the representation office of the European Commission in Portugal, the National Association of Portuguese Municipalities, the Economic and Social Council, and the National Youth Council. Taken together they organised seven events throughout the country, three of which were co-organised by the Portuguese parliament (see Table 4.2 on CoFoE-related activities of the Portuguese parliament).

Table 4.2 Parliamentary activities of the Portuguese parliament related to CoFoE.

<i>Plenary debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary questions</i>	<i>Resolutions</i>	<i>Committee meetings/ debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary information reports</i>	<i>Press releases</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Hearings</i>
0	2	2	9*	1	1**	3	0

Source: Author’s own.

*see also Table 4.3, **by parliament

In this context, the *Assembleia da República* organised two events in partnership with local entities and in a hybrid format. The first one, dedicated to the topic “Migrations and International Partnerships”, took place in Évora and was attended by civil society organisations, particularly young students, the Student Association of the University of Évora, the Portuguese Platform of Non-Governmental Organisations for Development, the Portuguese Bar Association, MPs, the Secretary of State for European Affairs, academics, among others.

The second national event organised by the *Assembleia da República*, took place in Santarém and was devoted to the topic ‘An Economy that Benefits Citizens: Agricultural Policy and the Fight against Climate Change’. As in the previous event, the debate also benefited from the input from representatives of civil society, such as the Economic and Social Council, the National Agriculture Confederation, the Confederation of Portuguese Farmers, and the Alviela Anti-Pollution Commission, along with economists, students and academics and the Members of the *Assembleia da República*. Both events were published on the multilingual digital platform and on the IPEX website, where the corresponding reports can be found in English and French (Assembleia da República, 2021b). To publicise the events, the *Assembleia da República* issued a press release (Assembleia da República, 2021c).

Besides these events, the Portuguese parliament used parliamentary instruments, such as two oral questions on CoFoE in the context of questioning the Prime Minister in preparation of the European Council in June 2022 (Assembleia da República, 2022a). The questions concerned treaty revisions to meet the final conclusions presented by the citizens in CoFoE (MP Rui Lage, PS), and the government’s position on two specific CoFoE conclusions: a European Health Union with shared competencies, and transnational lists for the European elections (MP Bernardo Blanco, IL). Oral questions are tools directed at both government scrutiny and citizen communication (see Auel, Eisele, and Kinski, 2016).

Evaluation of the Conference and Follow-up Activities

The EAC, led by Capoulas Santos, played a key role during the CoFoE, not only as the principal political body tasked with overseeing the Conference, but also in steering these internal and external activities. After these national debates and once the Conference adopted its final proposals, the committee went one step further and organised a series of debates to discuss them and the way forward. The first one took place on 2 November 2022 and gathered MPs, MEPs, as well as members of the regional parliaments in Portugal, to discuss the conclusions of the CoFoE that require treaty change (Assembleia da República, 2022b). On that occasion, the majority of interventions, especially those from the Parliamentary Groups with the highest representation within the *Assembleia da República*, expressed caution with regard to the time and opportunity to hold an Intergovernmental Conference on the revision of the treaties in the near future. However, they emphasised that if this matter were to be raised in the Council, Portugal should not oppose it (Assembleia da República, 2022c).

Table 4.3 Thematic debates in the Portuguese EAC on the outcomes of the CoFoE.

<i>Date of Committee Debate</i>	<i>CoFoE Theme</i>	<i>Rapporteur</i>
4 April 2023	Theme One: Climate Change and the Environment	Luís Capoulas Santos (S&D)
26 April 2023	Theme Seven: European Democracy	Rosário Gambôa (S&D)
21 June 2023	Theme Two: Health	Luís Capoulas Santos (S&D)
21 June 2023	Theme Four: The EU in the World	Isabel Meirelles (PSD- EPP)
28 June 2023	Theme Three: Sustainable Growth and Innovation	Paulo Moniz (EPP)
18 July 2023	Theme Five: Values and Rights, Rule of law, Security	Isabel Meirelles (EPP)
18 July 2023	Theme Nine: Education, Culture, Youth and Sport	Rosário Gambôa (S&D)
4 October 2023	Theme Eight: Migration	Luís Capoulas Santos (S&D)
18 October 2023	Theme Six: Digital Transformation	Paulo Moniz (EPP)

Source: Author's own, adapted from *Assembleia da República* final report on the debate by the European Affairs Committee relating to the assessment of the implementation of the findings from the Conference on the Future of Europe (*Assembleia da República* 2024a, 16-7).

Furthermore, and to follow up on the implementation of the thematic proposals adopted during the CoFoE, the EAC decided to organise several debates to discuss such measures (see Table 4.3). These began in April 2023, focusing on measures from the Conference final report divided into the nine topics of the CoFoE, and Rapporteurs from the different political groups were appointed to analyse the concrete proposals and its possible implementation.

As a result of these meetings, the EAC, adopted a report with a detailed overview of these nine topics and made it available to all national parliaments (*Assembleia da República*, 2022b). With special relevance for the present volume, the main findings of this report under theme seven (European Democracy) were in general positive on the proposals made by the CoFoE (36 to 40) and on the debates held. For instance, on Proposal 36 (to increase the participation of citizens and young people in EU democracy), it was welcomed that a set of measures had been proposed to improve the EU's communication channel, activating mechanisms to follow up on legislative initiatives and requesting regular assemblies. On Proposal 37 (information on citizens, participation and youth), the report noted that the focus should also be on the need to improve European communication, particularly through the use of artificial intelligence. Two measures were emphasised, one focusing on improving information about the EU and about its democratic processes in particular, and the other focusing on supporting social media, both in terms of freedom and independence and in the fight against misinformation.

Several other issues were considered important, noting that their implementation would require treaty amendments and therefore further reflection was needed. These included the EU competence on education, the section on ‘democracy and elections’ (Proposal 38, including the request for a Europe-wide referendum, amendments to the electoral law for standardisation and transnational lists, the election of the President of the European Commission and the right to EP legislative initiative), but also ‘moving from unanimity to a qualified majority’ (Proposal 39), and ‘revising the subsidiarity mechanism for national parliaments’ (Proposal 40).

In January 2024, the plenary adopted a resolution assessing CoFoE very positively by

bringing a focus to its innovative character, particularly in terms of the involvement of European citizens in promoting dialogue with European institutions and decision-making bodies on an equal footing, as well as in the cooperation demonstrated between European Union institutions, national governments, and parliaments.

(Assembleia da República, 2024b)

The resolution also emphasised the importance of the continuity of the post-CoFoE follow-up, particularly the evaluation of the following-up of measures proposed by citizens that are either already being implemented or are to be implemented.

Concluding Remarks

Portuguese involvement in the CoFoE was marked by the country’s EU Presidency of 2021 preceding and overlapping with the launch of the Conference. That period was especially crucial since it consisted of inter-institutional discussions leading to the approval of the CoFoE’s working methods and the *modus operandi* regarding the development of the results and their follow-up. Additionally, the fact that the *Assembleia da República* presided over COSAC in the first half of 2021 meant that the chamber was charged with the task of not only ‘setting the scene’ for the parliamentary component of the CoFoE, but also of intermediating information flow, and coordinating positions among national parliaments, the European Parliament, and the CoFoE Executive Board smoothly.

The findings of this chapter indicate that the Portuguese parliament has successfully fulfilled its objectives, both regarding its own engagement in the process, as well as external coordination. The conducted research has shown that the three main concerns of the Portuguese delegation to the CoFoE identified ahead of the process (i.e., policy first, internal dissemination of information and outreach to external stakeholders) were effectively addressed. The chamber engaged in various policy-oriented debates and events, ensured a systematic flow of CoFoE-related information back to the house and all MPs, as well as reached out to citizens in cooperation with a network of executive, EU, and civil society partners. From the Portuguese MPs’ point of view, the CoFoE was a very positive experience whose

main achievement was establishing a dialogue between European citizens and European institutions, even on the most controversial issues.

With regards to inter-parliamentary cooperation, despite the fact that a common position between the EP and national parliaments was not adopted in the end, the dialogue established since the very beginning of the CoFoE did bring about a new feature of inter-parliamentary cooperation. The initial prudence with which the EP approached potential collaboration with national parliaments gave way to building confidence and joint efforts at reaching a consensus about the shape of EU democratic reforms. For the first time, and under the motto ‘strengthening democracy within Europe’, an attempt was made to have the two-sided collaboration to draft a concrete list of proposals. Although not endorsed by the whole spectrum of 216 parliamentarians, these proposals could hopefully prove essential for future strategic debates, particularly when the mandate for a future convention to revise the treaties may be discussed in the future.

In sum, the Portuguese parliament developed a high degree of ownership of this deliberative exercise and actively worked to foster its dynamics, ultimately affirming CoFoE as an ‘opportunity structure’ to, on the one hand, re-engage with citizens and, on the other, to revitalise inter-parliamentary cooperation.

From the author’s perspective, based on the direct observation of the process, one critical view would be that too much time was allocated to discussions amongst institutions on the governance structure, on the distribution of tasks and power among them, while the time for the debates on the nine topics was in general too short to allow for a true in-depth deliberation process (see also Chapter 8 by Oleart in the present book and Oleart 2023). In the specific case of national parliaments, which are usually more plural and, hence, do not have such an agile, collective, and streamlined decision making and deliberative process, more time was needed to come up with a core of concrete proposals and ideas. In this context, it is important to remember that the CoFoE raised high expectations among citizens for the future, not only on the follow-up of the proposals, but also on a more structured and meaningful way of ensuring that citizens’ participation becomes a key feature of the EU policy-making process.

Notes

- 1 The views expressed here are strictly personal and do not bind or reflect in any way the political and institutional position of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*.
- 2 Law no. 43/2006 of 25 August, as amended by Law no. 21/2012 of 17 May, Law no. 18/2018 of 2 May and Law no. 64/2020 of 2 November, and Law No 44/2023 of 14 August. Accessed April 11, 2024. www.parlamento.pt/Legislacao/Documents/Legislacao_Anotada/AcompanhamentoApreciacaoPronunciaARProcessoConstrucaoUE_annotado.pdf
- 3 The EP adopted a resolution on 15 January 2020, a week before the Commission presented its ideas on the Conference in a dedicated communication (22 January 2020). The Council was last to position itself on 24 June 2020, initiating the inter-institutional negotiations on the Joint Declaration on 30 June.
- 4 On 24 March, 7 and 22 April, 9 and 26 May.

- 5 In a total of around 404 participants.
- 6 Available here <https://ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/conferences/cofe/static/082d29087bd0582d017bdf031b080044>
- 7 This is an internal unpublished document, to which both the author and editors have access.

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5 Building Consensus among National Parliaments

Ambitions and Challenges of the French Parliament during the CoFoE

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Introduction

The French parliament's involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) stands out in several ways. First, since the idea of the Conference originated from the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron's letter published in all EU languages in 2019 (Macron, 2019), its execution became not only a matter of the President's political ambition, but also of the country's domestic politics. Second, and consequently, the timing of the CoFoE was negotiated and adjusted accordingly to suit the French political cycle and converge with the French EU Council Presidency scheduled for 2022. Although originally, the Conference was supposed to last for two years (2020–2022), its envisaged start was postponed by a year due to the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the delay, EU institutions did not decide to extend the process until 2023, but opted for a shorter, one-year long event (CoFoE, 2021a). That lack of a more generous time-adjustment can be explained by the pressure from France to conclude the Conference during the French Council Presidency, just before the French presidential election and subsequent parliamentary elections, all taking place in 2022. That way, Emmanuel Macron – facing his second-term elections – wanted to mark his European legacy and claim credit for the successful conclusion of the Conference (see *Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sacriste, 2021*). As can be imagined, in the context of the presidential election race (April 2022), as well as the subsequent legislative electoral campaign (June 2022), the CoFoE became a matter of domestic political discussions and an element of electoral competition. For MPs of the presidential majority, a positive conclusion of the process guaranteed the success of the presidential initiative; for the opposition, it became an attractive subject of contestation.¹

The fact that France held the Council Presidency in the first half of 2022 had important implications for the role of the French bicameral parliament in the CoFoE. The two French chambers, National Assembly, and the Senate, were responsible for coordinating the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency during the Conference's most intensive period. Between January and June 2022 five out

of the seven Plenary meetings of the CoFoE were organised and almost all of the meetings of its Working Groups (WGs). CoFoE was also taking place in parallel with many inter-parliamentary events organised by the French parliament within COSAC.² Since in the first four months of 2022 inter-parliamentary meetings took place on average every three days, there was a certain overlap between those meetings and the CoFoE events. As will be shown below, one of the most strategic parliamentary fora at that time was the COSAC Working Group on the role of national parliaments established under the French Presidency.

Finally, the timing of the French Presidency also coincided with the conclusion of CoFoE's work, when each Conference "component" was supposed to validate the proposals drawn up by its Working Groups and forward them to the Executive Board responsible for drafting the final report. While the role of previous parliamentary Presidencies focused on setting up and influencing the agenda of the Conference (see Chapter 4 by Dias-Pinheiro and Chapter 6 by Grinc in this volume), the French parliament found itself responsible for bringing the 27 national parliaments (composed of 39 chambers) to a consensus as regards the CoFoE's final recommendations. This posed a strategic challenge for the two Co-Chairs of the French parliamentary delegation to the CoFoE: Jean François Rapin (*Les Republicains*), Chairman of the Senate's European Affairs Committee (EAC) and Pieyre Alexandre Anglade (*Renaissance*), Vice-Chairman of the National Assembly's EAC.

The aim of this chapter is to delve deeper into this challenge by analysing the strategies the two chambers and their representatives adopted to get national parliamentarians on board in building consensus around the outcome of the Conference. To this end, an actor- and process-oriented approach is applied that zooms into the political agenda and agency of the two aforementioned political protagonists during the CoFoE: Pieyre-Alexandre Anglade and Jean-Francois Rapin. The first section of the chapter presents the contextual factors behind the French parliament's involvement in the CoFoE. The following section zooms into the political composition of the French delegation focusing on the two parliamentary entrepreneurs and their political agendas. We then explore how the two MPs navigated among the institutional and political sensitivities of the two parliamentary pillars (national parliaments and the EP) to arrive at an ambitious and satisfactory agreement, to finally explain why these goals were not fully achieved. The research presented in this chapter is based on the abundant public documentation related to the CoFoE, including parliamentary reports, resolutions, and meeting minutes, as well as on a series of interviews³ conducted with actors directly involved in the Conference, including the two protagonist French MPs.

Institutional and Political Context

A distinctive feature of the French political system is the central role played by the President of the Republic and the consequent dominance of the executive branch in day-to-day policy-making, including in European affairs. As regards the latter ones, the French legislature is considered moderately weak in terms of its institutional prerogatives for government control and influence mechanisms in domestic

EU policy (Karlas, 2012; Winzen, 2012). While the two parliamentary chambers can adopt “European resolutions” to express their position on draft EU acts with a view to discussions in the Council of the EU, the government is not obliged to comply with them.

Against this background, deprived of genuine mandating powers at home, the French parliament has endeavoured to use available external channels of influence in the area of EU affairs. One of them is the informal mechanism of a “green card” conceived by national parliaments in 2015 as a form of enhanced political dialogue, through which national chambers could collectively make suggestions for EU policy initiatives or for reviewing the existing EU legislation (Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2017). Both French chambers co-signed the first green card on food waste in July 2015. Subsequently, in October 2015 the National Assembly tabled a proposal for the second green card on corporate social responsibility and, in November 2015, both chambers supported the third card proposal by the Latvian *Saeima* on a revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive which, however, never made it to the Commission. Around the same time, the French Senate expressed readiness to propose green cards on Energy Union and Digital Agenda, which ultimately never materialised (Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2020). That activity illustrates the French parliament’s appetite to play a more meaningful role in EU affairs than the one foreseen by the domestic constitutional arrangements, or that of a subsidiarity watchdog foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty. As will be shown in the remainder of this chapter, this ambition had its reflection in the French parliament’s involvement within the CoFoE, especially in teaming up with the EP to push for strategic institutional reforms aimed at enhancing the role of parliaments in the EU. In this context, the CoFoE represented a clear opportunity structure for the French legislature to voice its EU-oriented proposals for parliamentary empowerment. Among others, the idea of the green card has found its place, as a formal citizens’ recommendation, in the CoFoE final report.

As to the political context, in the first half of 2022 French politics was strongly dominated by the presidential elections scheduled for April and the subsequent legislative elections scheduled for June. At that time, President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Jean Castex enjoyed a solid majority in the National Assembly (nearly 60% of seats). Conversely, the presidential party was in minority in the Senate (11% of seats), where *Les Républicains* (42% of seats) and *Union Centriste* (16% of seats) held the majority. Such asymmetry is a typical feature of the French bicameralism, where the indirect nature and timing of the Senate elections result in its composition being often unrelated to that of the Assembly and government majority. Moreover, the French Senate plays a concrete function of territorial representation for the local and regional bodies, which had implications for the postulates voiced by its representatives during the CoFoE.

In this context, the parliamentary dimension of the French EU Presidency was taking place in a climate of political and electoral competition, against a backdrop of conflicting majorities in the two chambers. For obvious reasons, CoFoE – launched at the initiative of Emmanuel Macron – was itself an object of political campaign. It was perceived as a politically strategic asset for the President of the

Republic in the race for the Élysée, *vis-à-vis* the pro-EU electorate. In fact, the 2022 French EU Presidency was widely described in the domestic press as being instrumentalised by Macron to position himself as the pro-EU candidate during the presidential campaign (Schoen, 2021).

French Parliamentary Delegation to the CoFoE

The French delegation to the CoFoE consisted of two representatives from the National Assembly and two from the Senate. In both cases, a representative of the parliamentary majority was appointed as head of the delegation, along with a representative of the main opposition group. Thus, the Speaker of the National Assembly, Richard Ferrand (Renew), appointed Pieyre-Alexandre Anglade (Renew) and Constance le Grip (EPP), both members of the Assembly’s EAC, while the Speaker of the Senate, Gérard Larcher (EPP), appointed Jean-François Rapin (EPP), Chair of the Senate’s EAC and Gisèle Jourda (S&D), Vice-Chairwoman of the EAC (see Table 5.1). Since France was holding the EU Presidency at the time of the CoFoE, and members of the COSAC Presidential Troika could act as observers in the work of the CoFoE’s Executive Board, the two Chairmen of the EAC of the National Assembly and Senate (respectively Sabine Thillaye and Jean-François Rapin) were also acting as observers in the Board’s meetings.

With regard to the Conference’s Working Groups, Jean-François Rapin, a medical doctor, was appointed to the “Health” group, Pieyre-Alexandre Anglade to the “Climate change and environment”, Constance le Grip to the “Digital transition” group and Gisèle Jourda, a member of the Senate’s Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee, to the “EU in the world” group (see Table 5.1). At the same time, Rapin and Anglade played central roles in coordinating inter-parliamentary cooperation in the context of CoFoE, insofar as they co-chaired all the meetings of the national parliaments’ component throughout the first half of 2022.

Table 5.1 CoFoE Plenary members from the French *Assemblée Nationale* and *Sénat*.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
Jean-François Rapin	Senate – Chairman of the EAC	Health	<i>Les Républicains</i>	EPP
Pieyre-Alexandre Anglade	National Assembly – Vice-Chairman of the EAC	Climate Change and the Environment	<i>En Marche</i>	Renew
Gisèle Jourda	Senate – Vice-Chairwoman of the EAC	EU in the World	<i>Parti socialiste</i>	S&D
Constance Le Grip	National Assembly – Member of the EAC	Digital Transformation	<i>Les Républicains</i>	EPP

Source: Authors’ own.

Challenging Co-Chairmanship of the CoFoE Parliamentary Component

To dive deeper into the strategies and agency of the two coordinators of the national parliamentary component, it is important to consider several aspects differentiating between the two actors. First of all, Rapin and Anglade belong to different political families, different generations, and possess a different relationship with the EU. Anglade is a convinced European, EU affairs expert and political entrepreneur of European integration (Cohen, Dezalay, and Marchetti, 2007). As a young Parisian holding a master's degree in European public affairs, Anglade in 2010 became parliamentary assistant to the French MEP Nathalie Griesbeck (ALDE) and subsequently to the Czech MEP Pavel Telicka, who later became Vice-Chairman of ALDE. That Brussels-based position enabled Anglade to work closely with the group's leader, Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt, who in 2021 would ultimately become a Chairman of the EP's delegation to the CoFoE. In the meantime, in 2016, Anglade began his cooperation with Emmanuel Macron, then Minister of Economy and Finance, by becoming *En Marche!*'s referent in Belgium. In 2017, at the age of 30 Anglade was elected to the National Assembly as a member of the presidential majority group and quickly became a Vice-Chairman of the European Affairs Committee. In December of the same year, he was appointed by Macron to form the task force responsible for *En Marche!*'s 2019 European elections campaign. In addition to his networks within ALDE, Anglade established links with various centrist parties across Europe such as *Ciudadanos* in Spain, *D66* in the Netherlands, or Charles Michel's *Mouvement Réformateur*. In 2018, Anglade was one of the initiators of the *En Marche!* campaign in favour of the transnational lists, one of the flagship proposals of the EP within the CoFoE. This political trajectory has brought him to a strategic position of the "President's Europe man", closely allied with the EP's reform agenda (see Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis in this book).

On the other side of the French parliamentary chairmanship, 20 years older Jean-François Rapin – political opponent of the French President – had a much more cautious approach to EU reforms. Born in the Nord Pas de Calais, he studied medicine in Lille and at the age of 29 set up his own practice in the small seaside town of Merlimont. After becoming its mayor in 2001, Rapin embarked on the traditional *cursus honorum* of the French elected officials (Gaxie, 2003) and acquired a strong local foothold. In 2004, he was elected as a regional councillor for the Nord Pas de Calais region, and re-elected mayor of Merlimont in 2008 and 2014. In 2017, he was for the first time elected to the Senate and took the position of the Vice-Chairman of the EAC. Three years later he became its Chairman. Unlike Anglade, Rapin did not feel any specific vocation for European politics, and it was his local interest in fisheries, at a time when the latter became one of the stakes in Brexit negotiations, that justified his European ambitions in 2020. Gradually, Rapin became an expert in EU affairs and understood that the CoFoE might provide an attractive opportunity to advance his agenda in favour of strengthening the position of national parliaments, enhancing subsidiarity and bringing Europe closer to its citizens, particularly in rural areas.

The different backgrounds and trajectories of the two chairmen were reflected in their varying political objectives in the context of the CoFoE. While for the young Macronist, the Conference was an excellent opportunity to pursue the French President's project of "European sovereignty" to which Anglade also subscribed (Anglade, 2019), Jean-François Rapin was much more reserved towards further EU integration, while at the same time aware of the local resistance to the idea of a "federal Europe", particularly in rural areas farthest from Paris.⁴ In the Senate's report on transnational lists and lead candidates presented in July 2021 (see below) Rapin described these two reforms as "false good ideas", which put him at odds with the line taken by Anglade.

In pursuing his integrationist agenda, Anglade could count on a strong ally in the person of Guy Verhofstadt, whose party belongs to the same European political grouping as Macron's. The main points of convergence between Verhofstadt and Anglade included agreement on the recognition of the EP's right of legislative initiative, the shift from unanimity to qualified majority voting in the Council, an extension of EU's competences in the field of public health, introduction of transnational lists for EP elections and institutionalization of the lead candidate procedure. Rapin, on the other hand, intended to use the CoFoE to boost the role of national parliaments in European policy-making in order to bring the EU closer to its citizens.⁵ He consequently acted as entrepreneur behind a number of measures to strengthen the position of parliaments, including the "green card" initiative.

Given the abovementioned differences, one might have imagined that the Senator would have distanced himself from his fellow MP and done nothing to ensure the success of the Conference understood as Macron's project. However, as we shall see, Rapin decided to "play along" expecting that it would enable him to successfully secure the provisions favourable to national parliaments into the CoFoE's final conclusions. Another crucial factor behind Rapin's engagement in the process was his political responsibility for safeguarding the reputational stakes of the French parliament. In any case, in the interviews, the two politicians described their collaboration during the CoFoE as relatively harmonious.⁶

The Challenge of Reaching Agreement among National Parliaments

Article 16 of the rules of procedure of the CoFoE addressed representatives of the national parliaments in the same way as Members of the EP (MEPs), members of the Council and of the Commission (CoFoE, 2021b). However, national parliamentarians (MPs) formed a considerably different type of a collective than the other Conference's components. First, they clearly were not a separate institutional entity, but a multinational group of individuals characterised by great diversity in terms of political orientation, formal prerogatives and administrative cultures to which they belong. Second, they had no permanent body or a platform to debate and articulate their positions. Third, as illustrated by the statements made by MPs in the context the CoFoE, some representatives of national parliaments also perceived the direct citizens involvement in policy-related deliberations, relatively unprecedented at the EU level, as undermining their functions of political

representation and control (see Chapter 6 by Grinc and Chapter 7 by Kaniok in this volume).⁷ Finally, since the CoFoE was designed by EU institutions, MPs also found themselves in a less influential position of the “guests” in the deliberative process vis-a-vis the institutional and political capacity of the “host” represented by the EP determined to use the CoFoE as means to strengthen its own prerogatives in the EU governance (see Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis as well as Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this volume). Against this backdrop, it was particularly difficult for the French parliament to keep the collective dimension of national parliaments on the same page throughout the Conference. The French Presidency, on the other hand, understood it would be in the driver’s seat when the final report is to be adopted, and that it would be its task to secure the collective parliamentary agreement on the final proposals. Indeed, the Conference’s rules of procedure (Article 17) stipulated that a consensus must be reached, on an equal footing, among the representatives of the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, and the national parliaments. In case a consensus could not be reached, it would be also for the French Presidency to shoulder – at least in part – the responsibility for the failure.

CoFoE Working Groups: Strategic Bodies in which National MPs Had Little Say

The nine thematic Working Groups set up by the CoFoE’s Plenary (for more on their composition see the Introduction to this volume) proved to be strategic structures for building the common position (Working Groups, 2021). Charged with the task of discussing citizens’ recommendations developed beforehand within the Citizens’ Panels and the contributions posted on the online platform, they were primarily intended to prepare the proposals for the CoFoE Plenaries, which in turn were to be fed into the Conference’s final report (CoFoE, 2021b, c). However, the French interviewees pointed to the fact that national parliamentarians ultimately had very little influence within the Working Groups. Taking into account that national MPs delegated to the CoFoE represented different nationalities and various political parties and parliaments, one could not expect them to be collectively organised and like-minded as the other pillars (i.e., EP, Council and Commission, or even citizens). Moreover, the interviewees indicated that many national parliamentarians were quite ill-prepared in terms of EU-related insider knowledge of the issues raised during the working sessions,⁸ unlike MEPs, who by definition are much more informed about the EU policy-making, and who could count on a specific CoFoE-dedicated secretariat set up by their institution. Moreover, some participants felt that the Conference had been dominated by the Executive Board and the EP as the host, to the detriment of the citizens (see below and Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this volume).

At the same time, the organization of the WGs gave their chairmen and chairwomen a strategic role. It was they who took charge of the summaries of the successive meetings, which may have given them an opportunity to select certain points, rather than others, for further discussion, or to endorse points of agreement rather than focus on the contested issues for the group’s report. As pointed out by

the interviewees,⁹ it was often through their specific relationship with the Chair of the WG that national MPs were able to put forward some of their ideas and positions. For example, as a member of the Health WG, Rapin recalled that he was able to put forward some of the points he was defending through his specific personal relations with the Slovak Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič (S&D), who chaired the group.

Parliamentary Component Meetings: Forum for Collective Position Shaping?

While the activities of the preceding Slovenian Council Presidency (the second half of 2021) were devoted to agreeing on the distribution of national parliamentary representatives among the CoFoE’s WGs, the French Presidency was tasked with building consensus within the national parliamentary component around the CoFoE’s substantial recommendations. In this regard, the French Co-Chairs’ strategy was to use the meetings of the parliamentary component to make MPs its spokespersons at the CoFoE.¹⁰ As reported by the interviewees, this was achieved by including in the agenda of the components’ meetings discussions dedicated to each of the themes of the CoFoE’s Working Groups. It was supposed to enable each MP to express his or her views, but also to build a subsequent collective position. In practical terms, the most consensual subjects were addressed first to create a constructive working atmosphere. Consequently, at the component meeting on March 24, 2022, Rapin and Anglade proposed to designate so called “relay parliamentarians” (*parlementaires relais*) in each CoFoE Working Group, who would report the positions agreed at the component meetings to the WGs and the other way round (see Table 5.2).

The meeting of the parliamentary component on April 7, 2022, which preceded the Plenary session at which the vote on the proposals put forward by the CoFoE WGs was supposed to take place, was devoted to adopting language for the relay MPs, to serve as a basis for their interventions in the Plenary. For each of the nine WGs, the French Presidency drew up a document setting out the measures that the

Table 5.2 “Relay parliamentarians” designated by the component of national parliaments.

<i>Working Group</i>	<i>Parliamentary relay</i>
A stronger economy, social justice and jobs	Mr Radu-Mihai MIHAIL (ALDE, RO)
Education, culture, youth and sport	Mrs Josune GOROSPE (ALDE, ES)
Digital transformation	Ms Elina VALTONEN (EPP, FI)
European democracy	Mr Axel SCHÄFER (S&D, DE)
Values and rights, rule of law and security	Mr Pere Joan PONS (S&D, ES)
Climate change and environment	Ms Hélène RYCKMANS (Greens, BE)
Health	Mr Jean-François RAPIN (EPP, FR)
EU in the world	Mr Ruairi O’MURCHU (GUE, IE)
Migration	Mr. Alessandro ALFIERI (S&D, IT) and Mr. Dimitris KAIRIDIS (EPP, HE)

Source: Authors’ own based on information obtained from the French Senate.

national parliamentary component supported or wanted to amend. The hope was that the collective dimension they represented would make it more difficult for the sceptical parliamentarians to oppose the Conference's proposals head-on.

The Fiasco of the Joint Declaration

Vis-à-vis the executive components of the Council and the Commission, national parliaments and the European Parliament (as two separate parliamentary components) shared a common role of direct citizens' representatives – a fact which could justify, at least theoretically, their cooperation and synergy within the CoFoE. Indeed, at the beginning of 2022, several meetings were organised between Guy Verhofstadt, Jean-François Rapin and Pieyre-Alexandre Anglade in order to arrive at a draft Joint Declaration that could be adopted by the two parliamentary pillars of 216 parliamentarians (108 MPs and 108 MEP).

In the interview, Pieyre-Alexandre Anglade pointed out that the aim of the Joint Declaration was for Verhofstadt to “put pressure on the Council” by showing that not only the EP, but also national parliamentarians, have similarly strong ambitions to reform the EU, especially in institutional matters, which cannot be ignored.¹¹ Understandably, achieving consensus between national MPs and MEPs could give the EP more clout to win its case on subjects on which the Council was more reserved. As is widely known, for Guy Verhofstadt and some members of the EP, CoFoE represented an opportunity to promote a set of federalist solutions and to strengthen the powers of the EP in particular (see also Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis, also Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in the present volume). For Anglade, on the other hand, reaching agreement on a Joint Declaration provided a way out of the tensions that existed among parliamentary delegations with integrationist positions represented by the French, Spanish or German MPs, those openly Eurosceptic represented by the Hungarian or Polish right wing MPs, as well as delegations like the Swedish or the Czech ones – with generally pro-EU stances, yet sceptical about potential treaty reforms (see also Chapter 6 by Grinc and Chapter 7 by Kaniok in this volume).¹² It has to be remembered that apart from the MPs, the agreement had to be approved by 108 MEPs, many of whom did not represent their member states' positions, but transnational political ideologies.

Jean-François Rapin's enthusiasm for the Joint Declaration was less obvious, given that he did not share the federalist line promoted by Anglade, specifically with regard to the introduction of transnational lists and the system of lead candidates. However, he ultimately supported the draft text including these two reforms, which can be explained by two factors. First, Rapin had the ambition to give more clout to national parliaments as a collective actor with a say in EU affairs, and signing a text carrying weight at the CoFoE could serve this purpose. Second, as explained in Chapter 4 by Dias Pinheiro in this volume, the draft declaration included several proposals to strengthen the position of national parliaments in the EU, such as introduction of the “green card”, facilitation of monitoring of the principle of subsidiarity, introduction of written questions for national parliamentarians, as well as greater transparency of the work of the Council and of the trilogues. Consequently,

for Rapin, the “political cost” of signing the document was ultimately limited, especially as his own political group at the European level (EPP) officially supported the initiative.

Against this background, a meeting of the two parliamentary components was organised on February 9, 2022, to discuss issues of common interest.¹³ The agenda also included discussion on the abovementioned proposals for EP’s right of legislative initiative, the green card for national parliaments, transnational lists and the extension of qualified majority voting in the Council. While the discussions were held in an inclusive format composed of MPs and MEPs, it was for the three Co-Chairs Anglade, Rapin and Verhofstadt, to take care of the subsequent drafting of the joint text. On March 12, 2022, the time the three entrepreneurs had agreed on the final wording, the proposal was sent for comments to all delegations from national parliaments. It very quickly became clear that it would not be possible to reach a consensus within national parliamentary component due to various dissenting voices, especially coming from openly Eurosceptic MPs and delegations opposing any sort of treaty changes. For example, as reported by Grinc (see his Chapter 6 in this volume), Czech MPs were not comfortable with the fact that most of the proposals had been significantly influenced by the EP. In this context Grinc recalls the Czech Minister for European Affairs, Mikulas Bek, observing that “the French Presidency of the Council, lasting from January to June 2022, had been strongly involved in the formulation of the outcome of the Conference, with its positions closely aligned to those of the EP” (Poslanecká sněmovna, 2023).

In a more radical tone, Estonian MP Anti Poolamets, member of the CoFoE Working Group on European Democracy, observed during the inter-parliamentary committee meeting of the EP constitutional committee in 2022:

This Conference was an artificial fabrication of public opinion in order to press down the Member States and their parliaments. The only competent power would be the Member States’ parliaments that would initiate reforms. Now the reform comes from upper levels and is pressed down on lower levels. This is not acceptable.

(European Parliament, 2022)

In view of dissenting positions on the draft Joint Declaration, an emergency video-conference was organised a few days later to bring together members of the parliamentary component. It nevertheless failed to save the initiative. Although the possibility of the adoption of a document in a format limited to certain chambers was raised, it also failed to materialize. As a result, the joint meeting of 216 representatives of the two parliamentary components scheduled for March 24 to adopt the Joint Declaration was cancelled.

COSAC Working Groups as an Attempt to Build Synergies among MPs

In the first half of 2022, in the framework of the parliamentary dimension of the French EU Presidency, two presidents of the French European affairs committees,

Sabine Thillaye (National Assembly) and Jean-François Rapin (Senate) launched a project to set up two Working Groups in the framework of the COSAC, one on the role of national parliaments in the EU chaired by Rapin, and another on the place of values at the heart of the sense of belonging to the European Union chaired by Thillaye (COSAC, 2022a). The timing of this initiative was of strategic importance for the CoFoE as it was supposed to add synergy and extra legitimization to parliamentary input within the Conference.

The initial timetable devised by the French Presidency was for the WGs to present their conclusions at the COSAC plenary meeting on 3-4-5 March 2022, which would allow the CoFoE parliamentary component to accommodate this input in the context of the CoFoE. To keep to this timetable, in July 2021 the two French EAC Chairs asked their Slovenian counterparts to include the creation of the two Working Groups on the agenda of the COSAC Conference of Presidents of the same month, which would have enabled work to begin in autumn of that year. Faced with a refusal of the Slovenian Presidency whose Co-Chairmen explained that they “did not see the need to set up new Working Groups during the Slovenian Presidency”,¹⁴ the envisaged timetable was postponed by four months. The French EAC’s Chair Sabine Thillaye described that situation in the following way:

The creation of those (COSAC) two Working Groups required a long process of persuading delegations from other parliaments. We would have liked to start work in the second half of 2021 in order to have more time. But the Slovenian Presidency opposed, officially so as not to interfere with the CoFoE, unofficially because every Presidency – especially that of a small country – is very sensitive about having subjects imposed on its agenda, and unofficially perhaps because the Slovenian Presidency did not want national parliamentarians to take too much interest in the issue of the rule of law.

(National Assembly, 2022)

As a result, the two Working Groups were only set up under the French Presidency, at the COSAC Chairpersons Meeting in January 2022, and officially started their work the next month. At the inaugural meeting on February 8, 2022, hosted by the parliamentary dimension of the French Presidency, Italian senator Gabriella Giammanco (EPP) supported Rapin’s idea that the WGs’ conclusions be used as input for the CoFoE (COSAC, 2022b). In a similar vein, at the next meeting on February 24, Hungarian MP Zoltán Balczó (NI) suggested that the COSAC WG should be represented at the CoFoE to promote the interests of national parliaments (COSAC, 2022c). Finally, at the CoFoE Plenary session on April 30, senator Rapin spoke of the role of national parliaments in implementing CoFoE’s conclusions, referring in particular to the work of the COSAC WG. The meetings of the latter one lasted until June 2022 and included consultations with parliamentary experts, which – according to Rapin – represented an unprecedented forum for discussion and consensus-seeking among national parliaments, which should have made it possible to develop common positions within the CoFoE.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the WG adopted its report only at the meeting in June, thereby not in time to provide a solid

and compromise-oriented input for the final Report of the CoFoE, which concluded in May.

To illustrate the synergies between the COSAC Working Groups and the activities carried out within the two parliamentary components of the CoFoE (MPs and MEPs), it should be noted that the aforementioned draft Joint Declaration of national parliaments and the EP did incorporate several elements from the COSAC WG on the role of parliaments, namely the “green card” with concrete proposals for its implementation; introduction of a right of written questions to EU institutions by national parliaments, and facilitation of subsidiarity control by lowering the threshold for triggering a yellow card (see also Chapter 4 by Dias Pinheiro in this volume).¹⁶

However, despite Rapin’s and Anglade’s intention to create synergy between the COSAC WG and the CoFoE parliamentary component in order to facilitate the common standing of national parliaments within the Conference, the reality proved to be more complex. It has to be emphasised that while the conclusions of the COSAC WG on the role of national parliaments were the only common position the national chambers adopted at the time of the CoFoE, those conclusions represented the position of a quite narrow group of MPs who were members of that Working Group, yet without a binding mandate committing their respective parliamentary chambers. Moreover, it has to be noted that only some 20 per cent of the members of the COSAC WGs were also delegates to the CoFoE. Sometimes, as in the Polish case, pro-EU MPs belonging to the opposition took part in the COSAC WG in the role of national parliaments, while the Eurosceptic MPs belonging to the ruling majority represented the Polish *Sejm* in the CoFoE Plenary and its Working Group on European Democracy, which dealt with similar issues. This discrepancy should be taken into account while evaluating potential synergies and the actual outcomes of the two parallel undertakings. Last, but not least, the EP preferred not to co-sign the COSAC WGs’ conclusions, which was regretted by Thillaye at the EAC meeting shortly after the conclusion of the CoFoE (National Assembly, 2022), as well as Rapin at the inter-parliamentary meeting of the EP constitutional committee in October 2022 (European Parliament, 2022).

National Parliaments Endangering the Success of the Conference

The CoFoE Plenary meeting of April 29–30, 2022 was of strategic importance as it marked the closing of months-long process of citizens deliberations, primarily taking place within the Citizens’ Panels and subsequently in the Conference Working Groups, with the formulation of 49 comprehensive proposals for EU reforms. To officially endorse the final document, each of the CoFoE components was expected to express its support for the proposals so that they could be forwarded to the Executive Board to draw up the final report. While there were no objections from the EP’s delegation, it should be reminded that just a few days earlier the political group of European Conservatists and Reformists (ECR) had withdrawn from the Conference, framing the process as a failure (ECR 2022, more on this in Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this volume). Among

other reservations, the right wing Eurosceptics pointed out that the CoFoE Working Groups' proposals included the EP's "shopping list" such as the right of legislative initiative, transnational lists and the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. Considering that some of the 108 MPs composing the CoFoE national parliamentary component belonged to the ECR family who opposed that federalist reform proposals, as well as the fact that the joint parliamentary declaration had been already abandoned, the French Presidency faced an uneasy task to secure unanimous parliamentary support for the 49 proposals. In that context, the only tool the French could resort to in order to build consensus for the CoFoE conclusions was "relay parliamentarians" method.

In that respect, ahead of the national parliamentary component meeting of April 29, the French Presidency drew up a draft declaration to be adopted by the delegates, which simply expressed the consensus of the national parliaments on the Conference's final proposals and agreed to their transmission to the Executive Board. As reported by the interviewees, while the French intention was to simply vote on the text under discussion, many MPs intended to take the floor to express their disagreement with the wording or the substance of the declaration.¹⁷ Reportedly, delegations from Viségrad countries were among the most vocal opponents of the text, but even some of the less critical delegations solicited changes to the wording of the document. Faced with an imminent fiasco, the French Presidency representatives did not hesitate to challenge the most recalcitrant parliamentarians by asking them if they were prepared to "individually derail the entire deliberative process of the CoFoE in the name of their particular reservations".¹⁸ After a few hours of further discussion, an ambiguous formula was found, which did not indicate that a consensus had been reached, but did not state that there was obstruction either. It read that "the national parliaments component agrees to put the proposals forward to the Executive Board as the results of the Conference to date".¹⁹ The exact same formula was subsequently articulated by the two Co-Chairs at the CoFoE final Plenary meeting on April 29–30, but along with a note that representatives of national parliaments did not agree with all of the proposals and that some gave rise to their legitimate objections.²⁰ While the lowest common denominator declaration miraculously saved the fate of the Conference, the additional side note "said it all" about the (lack of) synergies and (underlying) legitimacy clashes within the national parliamentary pillar.

French Parliament as Ideas-hub for EU Reforms

In parallel to the coordination activities within the national parliaments' component of the CoFoE, the French parliament actively engaged in several intellectual and strategic undertakings aimed at stirring the debate around the future of Europe and EU institutional reforms. The scope and thematic agenda of the events reflected the French parliament's ambition to shape the discussion on potential reform ideas which, *inter alia*, were supposed to result in strengthening the role of parliamentary actors in the EU. On March 18 and 19, 2021, the National Assembly's EAC, in

Table 5.3 Parliamentary activities of the French parliament related to CoFoE.

Year	Plenary debates	Parliamentary questions	Resolutions	Committee meetings / debates	Information/ opinion reports	Press releases	Events	Hearings
2020	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
2021	0	5	1	0	1	1	4	1
2022	0	3	0	1	1	0	1	0
2023	0	1	1	2	2	0	0	0
Total	0	12	2	3	4	1	5	1

Source: Authors’ own based on information obtained from parliamentary website: www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/recherche/resultats_recherche

partnership with the Robert Schuman Foundation and the Jacques Delors Institute, organised a symposium entitled “Europe urgence, Europe espoir”. Comprising seven round tables with some 30 speakers, the symposium aimed at identifying institutional reforms likely to be undertaken in the run-up to the CoFoE in order to strengthen the Union’s capacity for action (National Assembly, 2021a). In a similar spirit, in September 2021 the EAC organised a hearing of the Minister for European Affairs, Clément Beaune, on – among other things – the Conference on the Future of Europe.

For its part, in July 2021 the Senate’s EAC adopted a rather critical report on transnational lists and the system of lead candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*) – ones of the potential EU reforms strongly supported by the EP but called “false good ideas” by Senator Rapin (Senate, 2021). Subsequently, in December 2021 the Senate’s EAC organised a colloquium on the role of national parliaments in the EU. Some fifteen academics discussed the questions related to parliamentary scrutiny, inter-parliamentary cooperation and the relationship between national constitutions and European law.²¹ The Senate, which plays a special role in representing local authorities, also organised a consultation of local representatives to probe their expectations regarding the future of European integration. Its results were supposed to feed into the Senate’s contribution to the CoFoE Plenary²² and were the subject of two presentations to local representatives in November and December 2021.

Finally, in June 2021, just after the launch of the Conference, the two French EACs organised a joint meeting in a Weimar Triangle format with their counterparts from the German and Polish parliaments, focusing in particular on how to bring CoFoE to life and achieve desired results (National Assembly, 2021b).

After the conclusion of the CoFoE, both French chambers undertook the task of apprising the event. On the Senate’s side, on June 13, 2022, the two members of the CoFoE delegation, Jean-François Rapin and Gisèle Jourda, presented an initial assessment of the Conference to the EAC. One year later, in July 2023, they published a report on the follow-up of the Conference (Senate, 2023), in which President Rapin looked back on his experience in a rather critical light. Among

other reflections, he expressed scepticism towards the idea of direct citizens' involvement in EU governance and stressed the importance of national parliaments in this regard:

The Conference on the Future of Europe was intended to bring Europe closer to its citizens and meet their expectations. In reality, the exercise was rather disappointing, resulting in a catalogue of over 300 measures of unequal importance. In my view, recourse to participatory democracy within citizens' panels is not a panacea for the European Union's democratic deficit. National parliaments also have an essential role to play in bringing Europe closer to its citizens.

Gisèle Jourda expressed similar scepticism albeit for different reasons:

I agree that the Conference on the future of Europe was a rather disappointing democratic exercise, with unrepresentative citizens' panels and a lack of visibility among public opinion. Within the Working Group on the European Union's place in the world, of which I was a member, the debates lacked a framework, and in the end, the Conference produced a rather disappointing catalogue of proposals.

(Senate, 2023)

The delegates of the National Assembly evaluated the CoFoE in a quite different tone. In July 2023 Pieyre-Alexandre Anglade and his colleague Julie Laerones (Greens) presented an information report in which they praised the CoFoE as a deliberative process and legitimised citizens' recommendations calling for "more Europe" through deeper democratic institutions and implementation of concrete EU policies. They also called for the revision of the treaties and convening of a Convention (National Assembly, 2023a). Also, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Assembly issued a report in this matter which named CoFoE as "an important first step in bringing the EU closer to its citizens" but stressed that the success of the exercise "would depend on the actual implementation of its conclusions" (National Assembly, 2023b). The two reports called for this type of participatory and deliberative exercise to be made permanent, and for the Conference's proposals to be implemented, in particular the extension of qualified majority voting in the Council and the EP's right of initiative. On a more personal note, Pieyre -Alexandre Anglade made no secret of the fact the CoFoE experience – despite finishing with reaching some sort of parliamentary consensus among numerous obstacles – was trying for him.²³

It is important to emphasise that on November 29, 2023 a few days after the EP's plenary adopted the AFCO's proposals for the amendments of the treaties (European Parliament, 2023), the French National Assembly adopted a resolution calling for a rapid implementation of all the conclusions of the CoFoE while respecting the democratic timeframe opened up by the EP elections in spring 2024 and calling on the European institutions to publish a scoreboard on the implementation of the Conference's recommendations (National Assembly, 2023c). It

consequently urged EU institutions to take full advantage of the recommendations of the CoFoE by convening a Convention to revise the treaties. In this sense, the French National Assembly is probably the only chamber that keeps on referring to the CoFoE as a legitimate source of potential EU treaty reforms in its formal communications.

Conclusions

From a political and strategic point of view, France should be viewed as a country with the highest degree of ownership of the CoFoE since the original idea of organising it came from President Emmanuel Macron, whose EU-oriented entrepreneurship is well known among EU member states. While one cannot deny the undisputable democratic value of such a transnational participatory initiative, this chapter has shown that there was also a lot of credit-claiming and political calculation involved in pushing this democratic project forward. One of the illustrations of this was the French pressure on EU institutions to shorten the original timeframe of the Conference in order to adjust its conclusion to the government's domestic political agenda and align it with the French EU Council Presidency scheduled for 2022.

Our research confirms that, first and foremost, the French parliament played a crucial and protagonist role in coordinating inter-parliamentary cooperation around the CoFoE during the second part of that exercise (2022). The data we gathered and the interviews conducted reveal that the main driving forces of the French parliamentary engagement in the Conference were the ambitions of individual political actors. Apart from President Macron, it was the two Chairs of the French parliamentary delegation to the Conference – Pieyre Alexandre Anglade and Jean-Francois Rapin – who drove the process forward, overcoming uneasy challenges to build consensus among the 27 national parliaments and the EP around the final recommendations. Despite considerably different political backgrounds and positions on EU integration, they managed to cooperate and synergize throughout the six-month period of the French Presidency and build support for the joint inter-parliamentary declaration. They engaged in various intra- and extra-parliamentary activities to feed ideas for EU reforms into the process. While Anglade's integrationist stance made him a natural ally of the host of the process – the European Parliament, Rapin was pushing to promote the interests of national parliaments and local and regional authorities by voicing the need to strengthen subsidiarity and constructive leverage of national and regional legislatures in EU affairs.

As shown in detail in this chapter, achieving consensus among 108 national parliamentary delegates from various member states over potentially divisive proposals for EU reforms did not come easy. It was especially complicated in view of the EP's desire to make the CoFoE a platform for deepening of EU integration (see also Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis and Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in the present volume). The perception of some MPs that the EP was trying to impose certain political solutions and reform proposals despite insufficient support among parliaments and citizens exacerbated this conviction. In this context, the French

Presidency, both within its executive and parliamentary dimension, was sometimes perceived as allying too strongly with the agenda of the EP, which became one of the main objects of criticism within the national parliamentary component.

From a broader perspective, the CoFoE was a partial success for the French parliament: while it managed to “save” face for the national parliamentary component by securing the lowest common denominator statement of consent to pass the 49 citizens’ proposals on to the Executive Board, it failed to produce a strong and inclusive message endorsed by national parliaments and the EP on how they envisage strengthening parliamentary democracy in the EU. From the individual parliamentary entrepreneurs’ point of view, it seems that the CoFoE turned out to be a far less spectacular event than they had hoped for. At some point, Anglade must have realised that it was rather unlikely that CoFoE’s recommendations would result in an ambitious revision of the treaties to the credit of his political patron, the French President, but also to his own. It seems that despite considerable political effort, he did not make use of the opportunity to build his autonomous political capital through the CoFoE. For Rapin, the situation looks different. Re-elected to the Senate in September 2023, he has retained his mandate as a Chairman of the EAC. Through COSAC and inter-parliamentary cooperation, he can hope to continue working on promoting parliamentary-friendly reforms such as the “green card” for the next years to come.

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Notes

- 1 For example, Jean Luc Melenchon, the leader of the left-wing *La France Insoumise* criticised CoFoE calling it “a farce and a democratic flop” see: <https://melenchon2022.fr/plans/europe/>
- 2 The Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union.
- 3 The list of interviews is included at the bottom of the chapter. Some interviewees wished to remain anonymous.
- 4 Interview 4, 11 July 2023.
- 5 Ibidem.
- 6 Ibidem; interview 5, 5 October 2023.
- 7 Interview 3, 15 November 2023.
- 8 Interview 2, 27 September 2023; interview 5, 5 October 2023.
- 9 Interview 4, op.cit.
- 10 Interview 3, op.cit.
- 11 Interview 5, op.cit.
- 12 Both Anglade and Rapin have made the same analysis of existing groups and tensions in the parliamentary component.

- 13 Agenda for February 9, 2022 meeting of the national parliamentary component and the EP component communicated to CoFoE parliamentary representatives obtained from the Senate's Secretariat.
- 14 Interview 3, op. cit.
- 15 Interview 4, op.cit.
- 16 Contribution of the French Senate to the work of the COSAC Working Group on the role of national parliaments, March 3, 2022.
- 17 Interview 4, op.cit., Interview 5, op.cit.
- 18 Interview 5, op.cit.
- 19 Letter obtained from the French parliament dated May 5, 2022 from the Pieyre Alexandre Anglade and Jean Francois Rapin to Kacper Płażyński (PL), Hanalka Juhasz (HU), Branko Grims (SL) and Anti Poolamets (ET) explaining the process of consent building around the final declaration.
- 20 Ibidem.
- 21 The proceedings of the colloquium have been published as a Senate information report: Jean-François RAPIN, "What role for national parliaments in the European Union?", report no. 168 (2023–2024).
- 22 Press release from the Senate European Affairs Committee, September 8, 2021.
- 23 Interview 5, op.cit.

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List of interviews

- Interview 1, Staff member, Senate, 15 September 2023.
- Interview 2, Staff member, European Parliament, 27 September 2023
- Interview 3, Staff member, National Assembly, 15 November 2023
- Interview 4, Jean-François Rapin, Senate 11 July, 2023
- Interview 5, Pieyre Alexandre Anglade, National Assembly, 5 October 2023

6 The Czech Parliament and the Conference on the Future of Europe

Observers, Facilitators, and Absentees

Jan Grinc

Introduction

The Czech Republic is one of the more Eurosceptic countries in the European Union (EU) on the level of both citizens and political parties (Hloušek and Kaniok, 2020) and its parliament is rather active in the political dialogue¹ with the Commission (European Commission 2023). The Conference on the Future of Europe (hereafter CoFoE) concluded just before the start of the Czech Presidency in the Council. Upon the completion of the Conference's work, it was up to the Czech Presidency to coordinate the follow-up, which also included the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency. These factors elicit research interest in the Czech involvement in the CoFoE as well as an expectation of an active role of the Czech parliament in this EU-driven undertaking. However, the actual record paints a different picture. Despite some activity by the parliament and its delegation, CoFoE did not evoke a broader political debate in the Czech Republic.

Through a detailed analysis of parliamentary engagement in the Conference, based on parliamentary documents, interviews, as well as direct² observation, this chapter reveals that, despite its political ambition to strengthen the powers of national parliaments in the EU, the Czech parliament did not use the opportunity structure provided by the CoFoE to put forward its own agenda. The first part of this chapter outlines the constitutional setting of the Czech parliament, as well as its political composition during CoFoE and the communication of political parties about this process based on information and positions published on their websites. The second part examines the activities of the Czech parliament in the institutional negotiations preceding CoFoE, the process of nominating its delegates and their activities, both at CoFoE and in their chambers. The third part analyses the follow-up to CoFoE, including the approach to CoFoE in the parliamentary dimension of the Czech Presidency in the second half of 2022. For the second and third part, the chapter relies on resolutions and other official documents, records of parliamentary and inter-parliamentary meetings as well as CoFoE events, where available, and interviews with parliamentary administration. The chapter ends with some explanatory notes on the relatively inactive Czech position in the Conference,

pointing to parliamentary perceptions of the relation between participatory and representative democracy and the parliament's rational choice of priorities in the multi-arena environment of EU integration.

The Political Context of CoFoE in the Czech Republic

The Czech Parliament's Composition during CoFoE

In the bicameral Czech parliament (*Parlament České republiky*), the government is only responsible to the Chamber of Deputies (*Poslanecká sněmovna*), which has 200 members, elected in a proportional system for four years. The Senate (*Senát*) has 81 members, elected in a two-round majority vote for six years. In the Chamber of Deputies, EU affairs are mostly debated by the Committee on European Affairs (EAC). Its resolutions are deemed to be the opinions of the Chamber. Plenary discussions on EU documents are rare, unlike in the Senate, where any opinion on an EU document must be adopted by the plenary, usually on the recommendation of the Committee on EU Affairs (EAC) following a committee debate. While the government is legally obliged to take only the resolutions of the Chamber 'into account', it has committed to do the same with the Senate's resolutions (see Hrabálek and Strelkov, 2015).

The political composition of both chambers is rather fragmented. The October 2021 election of the Chamber of Deputies led to a complete change in the government. The minority centre-left government of Andrej Babiš's ANO 2011 movement and the Social Democrats (ČSSD, which failed to overcome the 5 per cent electoral threshold) was replaced by the majority government of Petr Fiala (Civic Democratic Party (ODS)), heading a broad coalition of five parties belonging to three different European political groups, ranging from European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) (ODS) through European People's Party (EPP) (the conservative Christian and Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) and the more liberal Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (TOP09) and Mayors and Independents (STAN)) to Greens-European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA) (Piráti). In the Senate, parties forming or supporting the Babiš government were only represented by nine senators, while the current government has an overwhelming majority there.

Domestic Political Communication about CoFoE

CoFoE did not feature prominently in the communication of the Czech political parties (see also Antal 2023, 166) or in the Czech public debate. This may be attributed to the prevalent lack of interest of political parties in highlighting EU affairs and their reactive, rather than pro-active, approach to these issues, but there are other reasons as well. While in all EU member states dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic before the opening of CoFoE, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine towards its end, consumed political attention, in case of the Czech Republic, also elections to the Chamber of Deputies in October 2021, the preceding electoral

campaign and the following formation of a new government dominated the political space.

Even as CoFoE was taking off, the political parties' communication remained focused on specific EU policy topics, especially the Fit for 55 legislative package from June 2021, which was hotly discussed in the Senate in October 2021. This applies to both mainstream and Eurosceptic parties – with the qualification that many of the mainstream Czech parties may be considered “a bit soft Eurosceptic” (Hloušek and Kaniok, 2020, 77). Unlike in the case of France, where engagement in the CoFoE was also taking place in parallel to the electoral campaign (see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book), in the Czech parliament, most parties did not offer any detailed comments or positions regarding the conference. Only the electoral programme of the *Piráti* and STAN coalition mentioned it, promising to support public participation in CoFoE (Piráti a Starostové, 2021, 289). Piráti also made the most comments on CoFoE on their website (e.g., Piráti, 2021a) and tried to mobilise their members to contribute to the CoFoE digital platform (Piráti, 2021b). This can be attributed to the well-functioning cooperation between the party leadership and its Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), as well as to their general support of innovative and participatory democratic mechanisms, which they also implement internally.

As far as Eurosceptic parties are concerned, the most anti-EU opposition party SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) mentioned CoFoE only in passing, in connection with debates on treaty revision, which it rejected as a threat to national sovereignty (SPD, 2021, 2022). The most notable statement of the centre-right Eurosceptic ODS on CoFoE was only made on 9 May 2022 (Europe Day), by MEP Jan Zahradil, when he announced the withdrawal of ECR from CoFoE and declared that the Conference failed and became a “carefully prepared Eurofederalist exercise [...]” with the sole aim of “further transfer of competences and their centralisation at EU level” (ODS 2022; for more on this see Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this book).

This was very much outside the political line taken by Petr Fiala's government, where ODS is the only explicitly Eurosceptic party, and the prime minister is not particularly close to his party's Eurosceptic hardliners. Thus, for the sake of smooth functioning of the coalition, and in view of the approaching Czech Presidency, the government parties avoided making CoFoE a point of domestic political contestation. CoFoE is not mentioned in the Policy Statement of the government (Vláda ČR, 2022) from 6 January 2022 and was mostly promoted in an informative way by non-political administration at the Office of the Government tasked with informing the public on the EU. The broad coalition government did not have any specific political agenda regarding CoFoE and its positions on CoFoE proposals remained rather reserved and vague. Instead, the government focused on its role as the upcoming Council Presidency.

Within the political parties, MEPs, especially the four Czech members of the European Parliament (EP) delegation, could have been expected to communicate more actively about the Conference. However, this was probably only true for Piráti. In general, the MEPs' influence on their national parties' internal debate

cannot be overestimated because they are usually detached from the national political arena and sometimes even grow apart from their party, which was the case of both members of the EP delegation elected for ANO 2011.

Czech Ambition pre-CoFoE: Securing the Participation of National Parliaments

In the preparatory phase, both chambers followed the discussions as well as the inter-parliamentary debates related to CoFoE, taking an active stance by voicing the importance of national parliamentary representation at the Conference (see also Antal, 2023).

The Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) delegation of the Senate's EAC supported the amendment of the Contribution of LXII COSAC from 3 December 2019, which called for full involvement and full rights of participation for representatives of both the EP and national parliaments. Subsequently, the EAC called on the government to ensure representation of national parliaments in adequate numbers and with full rights to participate. It also noted that CoFoE may only be successful if it openly discusses the EU's problems and if the method of its work is transparent (Senát EAC, 2019).

In the Chamber of Deputies, EAC discussed the preparation of CoFoE in February 2020, but without adopting a resolution. One of the MPs who acted as an entrepreneur of the idea of CoFoE was the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Radek Vondráček (ANO, 2011). First, at the meeting of Speakers of "Slavkov/Austerlitz 3" parliaments (Slovakia, Czechia, Austria) on 13 February 2020, he signed a Joint Statement on CoFoE supporting the idea of the Conference and emphasising that the process needs to be inclusive and that there should be "shared ownership by EU institutions and member states, including their national parliaments" (Slavkov/Austerlitz 3, 2020). The statement also highlighted the principle of subsidiarity and concluded with the following ambitious words:

National parliaments have an irreplaceable role in the process of European policy-making and its democratic legitimacy. It is part of European democratic tradition to take into account the wishes and aspirations of people whose natural representatives national parliaments are. The Conference should therefore make proposals and recommendations, based on the demands of people from different backgrounds and from all parts of the EU. This requires that the Conference engages with citizens and a broad range of stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue through a bottom-up process. Members of the national parliaments must be involved in the preparation of the Conference as well as in the governing bodies on the national level in order to be able to participate in the thematic and procedural agenda setting.

Subsequently, on 27 February 2020, a meeting on "The Development of the Czech Republic and the Future of the European Union" in preparation for CoFoE took

place in the Chamber of Deputies under the auspices of the Speaker and organised by the European Anti-Poverty Network Czech Republic, a non-governmental organisation (NGO). In his opening speech, Vondráček supported the participation of national parliaments in CoFoE, emphasising that “it is naive to think that national parliaments can be left out” and that he would like “the opposition to have a voice, too, because there are very few purely national positions on many issues of our fundamental interests” (Vondráček, 2020). He concluded his speech by expressing his willingness to continue similar debates in the parliament and his hope that “the Czech Republic will be able to capitalise on this during its EU Presidency in 2022, when the Conference should be over and the results will be implemented” (Vondráček, 2020).

Also, chairpersons of both EACs co-signed the joint letter to presidents of EU institutions drafted by the Croatian Presidency on the margins of COSAC Chairpersons meeting on 16 June 2020, which requested participation of national parliaments at the CoFoE, including in the steering bodies, on equal basis with the EP (Croatian Presidency, 2020).

When the preparation of CoFoE resumed in 2021, after a series of pandemic-related lockdowns, both chambers renewed their interest. The Chamber of Deputies’ EAC adopted a resolution in March 2021 (Poslanecká sněmovna EAC, 2021), welcoming the signing of the Joint Declaration on CoFoE setting up the structure of the Conference. The committee acknowledged the participation of COSAC Troika in the Executive Board, expressing regret, however, that it had only been attributed observer status. It also called for a definitive decision on the representation of national parliaments at the plenary, preferring equal representation of all national parliamentary chambers in the plenary and calling for offering participation to parliaments of Western Balkans countries.

In that phase, securing participation at the CoFoE was the main aim of parliamentary activities, rather than presenting substantive ideas for policy or institutional reforms. That was strategically important considering that although the Conference was supposed to put citizens’ voices in the spotlight, it was clear from the outset that EU institutions would be playing a significant role in CoFoE. Especially the European Parliament argued for a “leading role” for itself (European Parliament AFCO 2019; see also Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis in this book). This may have elicited fears among the MPs of hijacking the Conference from the citizens and turning it into another power struggle among EU institutions or, more precisely, a battering ram for the European Parliament’s institutional proposals (see also Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this book). Although national parliaments have agendas of their own, their participation could have balanced out the aforementioned tendencies and provided a point of view that perhaps would not have been as forcefully presented by Council representatives, usually high-ranking officials on the border between political and administrative level of national ministries. The importance ascribed by national chambers to CoFoE’s governance structure could also have been informed by recollections of the crucial role played by the Praesidium in the Convention on the Future of Europe, which was criticised as overpowered and authoritative towards the plenary (Karolewski, 2011).

The Czech Parliamentary Delegation to the CoFoE

Composition and Activities

Representatives to the CoFoE were selected autonomously by each chamber, without any significant political negotiations. In both chambers, chairs of EACs were nominated. Apart from the fact that they were the MPs most involved in EU inter-parliamentary cooperation, it was also logical because they were to become COSAC observers in the CoFoE Executive Board in 2022 due to the approaching Czech Presidency.

In June 2021, the EAC of the Chamber of Deputies elected Ondřej Benešík, Chair of EAC since 2013, and Jaroslav Bžoch, member of EAC since 2017 as CoFoE delegates. There had been no previous agreement of political groups regarding the composition of the delegation and no interest of other members of the committee to be nominated.³ Benešík was a member of the Christian-democratic KDU-ČSL (EPP), a small centrist conservative party which at that time was in opposition. Bžoch was a member of the then main government party ANO 2011 (Renew) and their most active MP in the EAC. He has also been the Vice-Chair of Subcommittee on Migration and Asylum Policy both before and after the October 2021 election.

In the Senate, the delegates were appointed by the Committee on Agenda and Procedure. The one delegate was Mikuláš Bek, Chair of EAC. The other delegate (and the only woman in the delegation) was Jitka Seitlová, Vice-President of the Senate. Bek, a former university rector, was elected to the Senate as a joint candidate of four political parties, being most associated with STAN (EPP), which had the second largest caucus in the Senate. Seitlová was elected to the Senate as a candidate of KDU-ČSL, which, as of 2021, had the third largest caucus in the Senate. Seitlová was one of the most experienced politicians in the Senate, having also been a candidate of Zelení (Greens) in the 2013 Chamber of Deputies elections. One of her political priorities has always been environmental policy, which was on top of the EU agenda in 2021. Despite being elected for the same party as Benešík, she may be considered more liberal in the societal issues and more pro-integrationist than KDU-ČSL's conservative mainstream.

Elections to the Chamber of Deputies held on 8 and 9 October 2021 did not cause a change in the Chamber's delegation. Both Benešík and Bžoch were re-elected as MPs, with Benešík re-elected as EAC Chair and Bžoch becoming EAC Vice-Chair. Benešík's party entered the new majority government, while Bžoch's party became the largest opposition party. There was no formal re-election of CoFoE delegates, although one of the new deputies, Jan Berki (STAN), showed interest in CoFoE and actively participated in the related inter-parliamentary committee meetings organised by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament on 17 May 2022 and 26 October 2022. However, the parliamentary election and formation of a new government affected the Senate's delegation as Mikuláš Bek became the Minister for EU Affairs in December 2021 and had to step down as a Chair and member of EAC. Due to his new executive function, Bek also became the member of CoFoE's Executive Board. In January 2022, he was replaced in the

Table 6.1 CoFoE Plenary members from the Czech *Poslanecká Sněmovna* and *Senát*.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
Ondřej Benešik	EAC Chair – Chamber of Deputies	Values and Rights, Rule of Law, Security	Křesťansko-demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová (KDU-ČSL)	EPP
Jaroslav Bžoch	EAC member, later EAC Vice-Chair, Chamber of Deputies	Migration	ANO 2011	Renew
Jitka Seitlová	Vice-President of the Senate	Climate Change and the Environment	Křesťansko-demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová (KDU-ČSL)	EPP
Mikuláš Bek (Until January 2022)	EAC Chair – Senate	Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport	Starostové a nezávislí (STAN)	EPP
David Smoljak (From January 2022)	EAC Chair – Senate	Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport	Starostové a nezávislí (STAN)	EPP

Source: Author's own.

Senate's delegation to CoFoE by David Smoljak (STAN), the new Chair of EAC see Table 6.1).

The composition of the Czech parliament's delegation to the CoFoE reflected the usual configuration of MPs engaged in inter-parliamentary cooperation in EU affairs and the fact that corresponding experience and individual interest were the main factors in the selection. All delegates belonged to a broad European political mainstream. None of the more Eurosceptic parties were represented, including ODS, the largest opposition party until the October 2021 elections, and then the main government party. This was not a result of a purposeful exclusion of Eurosceptic voices from CoFoE, but of a lack of interest. There were no political clashes over the composition of the delegation in either chamber. Although ODS forms a majority in the largest Senate caucus and thus would have been entitled to secure for itself a place in the delegation, it chose not to. Interestingly, ODS MEPs were absent from the EP's CoFoE delegation as well. With regards to the division of portfolios, all the Czech delegates were able to join the Plenary Working Groups according to their preference and areas of interest. Benešik was in the generalist Working Group on Values and Rights, Rule of Law and Security, Bžoch sat in the Working Group on Migration, Bek participated in the Working Group on Education,

Culture, Youth and Sport, which also suited his replacement, Smoljak, and Seitlová became a member of the Climate Change and Environment Working Group.

While delegates from the Senate attended the vast majority of sessions, delegates of the Chamber of Deputies were frequently absent – in at least 75 per cent of the sessions (COSAC, 2022a, 48). This disparity also had to do with the interruption of activities of the Chamber of Deputies following the October 2021 election and the higher workload and longer duration of plenary sessions in the Chamber of Deputies, but the low participation of the Chamber's delegates is still comparatively significant (see COSAC 2022b, 8). Regarding the activities and agency of the delegates, as reported by their accompanying staff,⁴ they acted more as observers and facilitators in the discussions carried out in the CoFoE Working Groups. In this sense, they stated opinions on their topics of interest, but were far from any power politics or attempts to steer the outcome of the debates, let alone the Conference. Neither the Chamber of Deputies, nor the Senate adopted a mandate for their delegations. This was in line with the established practice in the Czech parliament which does not issue any mandates to be followed by parliamentary delegates to any of the inter-parliamentary meetings, including COSAC. The four delegates were therefore free to pursue their own agency, without any coordination of their positions within their chambers, which was also related to the lack of formal reporting back to the parliament. Although in late 2021 there was an idea in the Chamber's EAC to establish a sub-committee on the Czech Presidency and the CoFoE, it did not come into being. Therefore, communication between the delegates and their parliamentary chambers about the course of CoFoE was mostly limited to occasional sharing of impressions of the delegates on the margins of EAC meetings, under 'any other business', or to short debriefs from COSAC meetings.

Senator Seitlová was the most active Czech delegate in attempting to stir some debate in the Senate. On 18 July 2021, she undertook an attempt to discuss CoFoE in a broader setting in the Senate through holding a conference 'Perspectives of the Czech Republic in the European Union (on the occasion of the opening of the Conference on the Future of Europe)'. It served as an initial brainstorming event with experts and stakeholders, including civil society – similar to the early 2020 conference in the Chamber of Deputies. However, no specific conclusions were drawn. Seitlová had also the intention for the Senate to discuss the proposals emerging from CoFoE in all parliamentary committees. She even announced this at the CoFoE Plenary on 22 January 2022. However, this was met with indifference in the Senate. On 29 March 2022, she informed the Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs on the course of CoFoE and the recommendations from citizens' panels, especially those relevant for EU institutional reforms. This point of the agenda was squeezed into a ten-minute slot and no discussion ensued (Senát ÚPV, 2022).

On 31 March 2022, a month before the CoFoE's final plenary, Senate's EAC heard an information from the government on the position it intended to take in the process of adoption of the CoFoE conclusions. This did not result in a broad debate either, but the government reaffirmed that it continues to emphasise the initial idea of CoFoE as a space for citizens' opinions on the future of the EU as opposed to

it being a place where EU institutions would promote their agendas (Senát EAC 2022). To sum up, apart from senator Seitlová, who acted as an individual ‘political entrepreneur’ behind the idea of CoFoE in the parliamentary realm, the Conference did not evoke much political interest among the MPs⁵.

Finally, participation of the Czech MPs in the CoFoE Executive Board within the COSAC Troika amounted to nothing more than passive observation. However, by 2022, the Executive Board had already largely fulfilled its role and only met three times. Its final task, the discussion and endorsement of the outcome of the Conference, went smoothly, without significant political controversies.

The Inter-parliamentary Dimension

The Czech parliament’s inter-parliamentary activity in relation to CoFoE did not go far beyond debates at the COSAC events (see Table 6.2). Although EAC chairpersons became members of the COSAC Troika in 2022, the decision of the French Presidency not to adopt a Contribution at the LXVII COSAC on 3–5 March 2022 deprived them of any heightened influence during the final months of the CoFoE.

Some of the activities undertaken by the Czech MPs in the context of inter-parliamentary relations reflect parliamentary ambitions and expectations regarding the Conference. For example, a Joint Statement from the meeting of Speakers of Visegrád Group (V4) parliaments on 11 June 2021 prepared by the Polish V4 Presidency declared the Speakers’ commitment to “active participation of the Visegrád Group states’ parliaments in the Conference on the future of Europe where they will coordinate their efforts in case of initiatives advanced by all V4 member states” (V4 Speakers, 2021). However, no such initiatives followed and there were no signs of such coordination taking place at the CoFoE involving Czech delegates and MPs from other member states. This situation aligns with the previous empirical findings revealing the tendency of Visegrád parliaments to voice criticism of EU policy along the calls for more self-oriented empowerment in EU affairs but failing to actively and meaningfully engage in scrutinising and influencing the EU

Table 6.2 Parliamentary activities of the Czech parliament related to CoFoE.

	<i>Poslanecká sněmovna</i>	<i>Senát</i>
Plenary debates	0	1
Parliamentary questions	0	0
Resolutions	3	3
Committee meetings/debates	3	3
Parliamentary information report	2	0
Press releases	1	1
Events	1	1
Hearings	1	1

Source: Author’s own.

agenda (Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Grinc, 2022). In this case, two factors could be at play. First, none of the Czech delegates to the CoFoE was politically close to the Polish and Hungarian governing parties' criticism of the EU. Second, even a coordinated effort of four parliamentary delegations would probably not have achieved much within such a large Conference.

Czech Parliament after the CoFoE

Personal Reflections of the Delegates

On 15 March 2023, EAC of the Chamber of Deputies held a 'debriefing' discussion with Minister for EU Affairs Mikuláš Bek summarising the course of CoFoE and the handling of its final proposals by the Czech Presidency. This was a noteworthy event in which all participants shared their views frankly (speeches translated from Poslanecká sněmovna EAC, 2023). Among various reflections, some are noteworthy. For example, Minister Bek stated that most of the proposals from CoFoE had been significantly influenced by the European Parliament, while the Council had been more restrained because of the divergence in member states' positions. He also observed that the French Presidency of the Council, lasting from January to June 2022, had been strongly involved in the formulation of the outcome of the Conference, with its positions closely aligned to those of the European Parliament (see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book). At the same time, according to Bek, some of the citizen panellists had come to view the panels as equal partners to EU institutions rather than merely consultative bodies.

In Ondřej Benešík's opinion, it was necessary to discuss CoFoE proposals, but many of them were unrealistic. The other CoFoE delegate, Jaroslav Bžoch, agreed with Benešík and Bek. In his view, rapporteurs of the Working Groups to the CoFoE Plenary often presented different opinions than those agreed during the Working Group's discussion. Moreover, Benešík and Bžoch expressed doubts whether citizen panels had been truly representative of EU citizens, indicating that some citizens had pursued very specific agendas in great detail, almost acting as spokespersons of various interest groups. Minister Bek shared this view and added that although the selection of citizens had been random, it could not have resulted in an ideal representation because the willingness and practical possibility to participate in CoFoE had acted as a sieve, skewing the representativeness. According to Bek, this imperfect representativeness was one limiting factor affecting the outcome of CoFoE, the other being the unavoidable lack of knowledge of EU policies among citizens. This had been a problem especially at the beginning, when most of the ideas put forward had been either trivial or already pursued by the EU. However, he noted that this should not devalue the many reasonable proposals in the final report, such as closer cooperation in health policy. While expressing scepticism on attempts to exaggerate the political weight of citizens' recommendations, Bek clarified that the Conference fulfilled its original aim of participative consultation and that its results should be accordingly considered by the institutions.

The opposition deputy, Bžoch, who had earlier expressed the view that CoFoE had been prepared by the European Parliament to strengthen its powers (Poslanecká sněmovna EAC, 2022a), and mentioned that in the Working Group on migration, citizens did not differentiate between asylum seekers, migrants and workers with visas travelling to the EU (Euractiv, 2022), supported the negative position of the government on calling of a Convention. The ensuing discussion focused on the treaty revision and qualified majority voting. Deputy Jan Berki (STAN), a “cautious supporter of changes,” including institutional ones (Berki, 2022), criticised the absence of a concrete position of the government on these issues as well as on other CoFoE proposals. However, minister Bek thought that many proposals were so vague and abstract that it would not be meaningful to try and formulate a detailed government position on each of them before they are fleshed out and transformed into the Commission’s legislative initiatives.

Czech senators reportedly saw as the main task arising from CoFoE the necessity for EU institutions to genuinely respond to citizens’ proposals and explain the obstacles to their implementation, including different preferences of EU institutions.⁶ This sentiment was voiced by senator Smoljak at the plenary of the Senate when introducing the Commission’s communication on the follow-up to CoFoE (Senát, 2022a). He summarised his experience at CoFoE in a quite ironic way by saying that the most common word he had heard from the citizen panellists was “frustration”:

Frustration that their proposals from the panels were not being immediately turned into concrete policies and frustration that the delegates of the European Parliament and the national parliaments accentuated their own agendas and prioritised them over the citizens’ proposals. I must say that when I participated in the last plenary session, the word “frustration” was all but missing. So, either the representatives of citizens gave up, or they learned to understand politics a bit better. They realised that the members of European Parliament and national parliaments simply have their undeniable legitimacy and that the citizen panellists are not the sole representatives of the people, as some of them may have believed in the beginning of the process.

He nevertheless concluded that he viewed the process of CoFoE positively, remarking that EAC proposed a resolution recognising the work of the citizens and institutions in this unique project.

The Institutional Position of the Parliament

While the preceding paragraphs recount the personal reflection of CoFoE by the delegates, in October 2022, both chambers also adopted formal positions (resolutions) on the outcome of CoFoE (Senát, 2022b; Poslanecká sněmovna EAC, 2022b). For this, they used the scrutiny of the Commission Communication on the results of CoFoE (European Commission, 2022) as an ‘undercarriage’. However, again, only a limited debate ensued.

The ambition of the Senate's EAC was to ask all other committees to discuss the communication and relevant CoFoE proposals, ideally piecing together a complex position of the Senate on the future of the EU. However, lack of interest resulted in only one sectoral committee (Committee on Health) discussing the communication and contributing to the resolution prepared by the EAC and adopted by the plenary of the Senate (Senát, 2022b). The Senate's main message was to calm down the calls for a treaty revision by claiming that "priority should be given to instruments provided by the existing legal framework," and that "in a time of war in Europe we should not exhaust ourselves in arguments about such institutional changes, that evidently are not consensually supported among Member States at the moment" (Senát, 2022b). This was in line with the government's position. EU institutions were asked to thoroughly assess CoFoE proposals and consider possibilities for their implementation.

The resolution of the Chamber of Deputies' EAC was much more critical of the outcome of CoFoE (Poslanecká sněmovna EAC, 2022b), expressing "doubts about the conclusions that the Conference brought, which are very similar to the views and wishes of the EP and do not fully reflect the views of the parliaments of the Member States". Similarly to the Senate, it rejected treaty amendments before utilising other instruments. It also emphasised the lack of proper information campaign regarding CoFoE in the member states, however, without pointing finger at EU institutions, the government, or itself. The rapporteur, Jaroslav Bžoch, expressed the opinion that the Conference had not fulfilled its potential, because it failed to inform the citizens and increase their interest in EU policies (Poslanecká sněmovna EAC, 2022c).

It was in the wake of the EP's strong push for institutional changes that the follow-up debates in the Czech parliament focused on treaty revision and voting in the Council. This may also explain why the Chamber's EAC returned to the topic of CoFoE in March 2023 as described above. As mentioned by minister Bek (Poslanecká sněmovna EAC, 2023), the European Commission was the institution best disposed to project the outcome of CoFoE into EU policies via concrete initiatives, and it did indeed take up this role in its work programme. The point made by the Chamber's EAC, that CoFoE's broader educational and communicative potential of openly discussing EU policies with citizens remained largely unfulfilled, did not elicit any follow-up initiatives from the Czech parliament.

A Legitimacy Clash between the National Representative and the EU Participatory Democracy?

Individual and institutional statements on the CoFoE summarised above may be interpreted as some sort of legitimacy clash between national parliamentarians and the citizens participating in the CoFoE, or at least parliamentary attempts to discredit the participatory potential of the Conference. However, it should be noted that the Czech parliament's reservations related to the process were mostly directed at institutional proposals championed by the EP's delegation. From the Czech MPs it could be heard⁷ (Poslanecká sněmovna, EAC, 2023) that the European Parliament

was perceived as unduly influencing or steering the citizens at CoFoE and turning what should have been a policy-centred discussion into a vehicle for its institutional empowerment. The resolution of the Chamber's EAC also signifies that probably, because of this active role taken on by the EP, the outcome of CoFoE could no longer be viewed as an undiluted expression of the participating citizens emerging from discussions, but rather should have been drawn as a thoroughly negotiated compromise of all CoFoE components, including national parliaments. This points to the ambiguous institutional design of CoFoE, which may have obscured the participatory element.

In this context, one should ask whether the noticeable downplaying of the representativeness of the participating citizens in relation to all EU citizens and the representativeness of CoFoE's outcome in relation to the participating citizens is warranted. The first issue would require a sociological analysis of the method of selection and participants' motivations during the Conference. Regarding the second issue, it cannot be denied that EP's delegation (its broad pro-integrationist majority) was uniquely suited to act as a strong and coherent component at CoFoE, also being able to draw from its many detailed resolutions dealing with the development of all EU policy areas (see Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis in this book). On the other hand, it should not come as a surprise that when political discussion is held among EU citizens on an EU-organised platform, solutions to any perceived problems (even of purely domestic nature) will naturally be sought at the EU level, which in turn implies deepening and broadening of EU integration, rather than asking, for example, which EU policies prevent actions desired at the member state level and how are these policies justified. The combination of these two factors may explain the Czech parliament's scepticism about CoFoE's final proposals, especially their institutional implications.

The Parliamentary Dimension of the Czech Presidency: Steering the CoFoE's Follow-up

With the conclusion of CoFoE in May 2022, it was up to the Czech EU Presidency in the second half of 2022 to coordinate the Council's follow-up. The Czech parliament had the same task within the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency. A general reflection on the CoFoE was integrated into the agenda of COSAC, concentrating on institutional issues. Already at the COSAC Chairpersons' Meeting in June 2022, the topic was touched upon during the discussion of the Presidency priorities (COSAC Chairpersons, 2022). A significant portion of the questionnaire for the 38th Bi-annual Report was dedicated to institutional proposals from CoFoE, together with the institutional proposals from the two COSAC Working Groups that were convened during the French Presidency in the first half of 2022 (for more on this see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book and IPEX, 2022). The plan of the Czech EAC chairs and their secretariats was to gather the national parliaments' positions on various concrete proposals for institutional changes and use this information to draft the respective part of the COSAC Contribution.

The questionnaire directed to all national chambers asked for their official positions, which was meant to encourage them to discuss the specific proposals in their national contexts. Both chambers of the Czech parliament replied on the basis of previous resolutions and positions on the individual institutional proposals (many of which were not new in essence), but neither one managed to debate and resolve the proposals in a dedicated session. Similarly, and unfortunately, most responding chambers indicated that they did not have an official position (COSAC, 2022b, 15–21). The most supported proposal was to broaden the citizens' right of access to EU documents. It is surprising that other proposals did not gather clear parliamentary support.

On the contrary, some of the CoFoE proposals championed by the European Parliament met with significant resistance from national parliaments, such as the reform of EU electoral law, especially the introduction of transnational lists, the direct election of Commission President, and abandoning unanimity in the Council. The questionnaire results did not reveal broad support for any of the institutional reforms proposed by CoFoE and, consequently, did not provide a sound basis for drafting an ambitious inter-parliamentary position in the following LXVII COSAC Contribution (COSAC, 2022c).

Stronger support was voiced regarding some of the recommendations of COSAC Working Groups set up during the French EU Presidency (for more see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book), some of which overlapped with CoFoE proposals, such as Proposal 40, that is, reviewing the subsidiarity check mechanism (in various aspects not elaborated upon in CoFoE) and granting the national parliaments the possibility to suggest legislative initiative at EU level, the so-called green card (COSAC, 2022b, 21–24). These issues were considered separately from CoFoE in the questionnaire, in order not to put the COSAC Working Groups' more detailed proposals in the mouth of CoFoE participants. The reflection of the COSAC Working Groups in COSAC contribution and conclusions was complicated by differing views within the COSAC Presidential Troika regarding the status of Working Groups' proposals (from which the European Parliament distanced itself) and the adequate follow-up (COSAC Presidential Troika, 2022).

A session dedicated to the future of the EU featured on the agenda of LXVIII COSAC held in Prague from 13 to 15 November 2022. The debate on CoFoE-related issues during the drafting and adoption of COSAC Contribution and Conclusions focused on the proposals from the COSAC Working Groups (see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book). The section of COSAC Contribution on the future of the EU (COSAC, 2022c, paras 17 to 19) was adopted consensually (including the EP's delegation), with only minor changes to the Presidency draft.

COSAC (neutrally) took note of CoFoE proposals and required EU institutions to ensure an effective follow-up “each within their own sphere of competences and in accordance with the Treaties.” It emphasised that “[c]itizens should be informed clearly, in detail and in all the official EU languages about the follow-up to individual proposals.” It also supported citizens participation and consultation mechanisms at the European level, highlighting “the importance of the Commission's genuine

and constructive approach to interaction with citizens and to the contributions and opinions of Parliaments as direct representatives of EU citizens (COSAC, 2022c). In this sense it combined citizen participation and parliamentary representation in a general call on the Commission to take both seriously.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the perspective of coordinating and taking responsibility for the follow-up of the CoFoE in the context of the Czech EU Presidency could elicit expectations as to the active and strategic engagement of the Czech parliament during the Conference. Such expectations were further sustained by the Czech parliament's active emphasis, in various domestic and inter-parliamentary fora, on the necessity to engage the national parliaments in the CoFoE. This, however, did not materialise, and the Czech parliamentary involvement remained limited to a few active MPs. Despite the initial push for enhancing representation of national parliaments at CoFoE, no substantial and broader party-political activity concerning CoFoE followed. While measuring the activity of the Czech parliament in relation to CoFoE would require defining a yardstick, which is not easy, it suffices to say that Czech parliament neither systematically monitored the activities of its delegates, nor mandated them in any way. Parliamentary delegates were able to follow their topics of interest within the Conference Working Groups, with the senators utilising this possibility more than the often-absent deputies.

Except for one senator who invested efforts to “export” CoFoE’s ideas into the domestic parliamentary arena, none of the delegates tried to effectively influence the Conference’s outcome, taking instead the role of observers, guests, or, at most, facilitators of the dialogue between citizens and EU institutions. Contrary to the ambitious stance presented by the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Radek Vondráček, before the launch of the Conference, it seems that neither the Czech parliament, nor individual MPs viewed this experiment as a new arena for their active engagement and pursuit of priorities, but rather as an opportunity to gather input from citizens, which was the main point of the Conference. At the same time, Czech delegates criticised the EP’s overly active role in shaping the Conference’s outcome but did not engage in any significant inter-parliamentary cooperation in this respect. The attitude of the Czech parliament can be explained from various perspectives. The respect for the participatory nature of the Conference and understanding that citizens should be the main actors is only one of them, another being the general Czech scepticism towards enhanced forms of participatory democracy in general. Notably, Czech citizens, while exhibiting one of the highest levels of Euroscepticism (Hloušek and Kaniok, 2020), also show comparatively low level of support for increasing citizen and civil society involvement in decision-making processes at both national and European levels. Only 45 per cent of Czechs endorse greater citizen engagement in EU-level decision-making, being one of the

lowest among EU member states, with the EU average standing at 68 per cent (Eurobarometer, 2023). While it is hard to say with any precision without further statistical research whether this public opinion trend affected the scope of the MP's engagement in the Conference, it is rather logical that political parties invest in issues of high salience in order to show to the voters that they can meaningfully advance their preferences in these areas. CoFoE did not seem to provide such opportunity. In addition, it cannot be overemphasised that in the broader domestic political debate, CoFoE was overshadowed by other issues, including domestic parliamentary elections. The Czech parliament's involvement in CoFoE shows that there are clear limits with respect to time and capacities the MPs are willing to invest in endeavours in which they are not the decision-makers and where their influence is insignificant. This is apparent both on the individual level and in the activities of the chambers. When the delegates tried to bring the debate from CoFoE back to the parliament, they encountered a lack of interest. Czech delegates were far from enthusiastic about many organisational, communication and substantive aspects of CoFoE. At the same time, they were not realistically able to remedy them.

During the Czech presidency, the EAC chairs, who played a key role in determining the substance and ambitions of the presidency's COSAC events, did not try to force their views upon the inter-parliamentary forum. By then, it was clear that the inter-parliamentary arena would not be able to reach common positions on the most significant institutional issues raised by CoFoE (see Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book), as opposed to the consensus on the necessity of parliamentary participation at CoFoE expressed before its launch. To conclude, it should be noted that while the Czech debate on CoFoE as such has ended, the related debates on EU institutional reform continue and eventually will require the renewed interest of national parliamentary chambers, as national parliaments will be the ones approving any potential treaty changes.

Notes

- 1 The political dialogue is a form of cooperation between national parliaments and the European Commission based on an exchange of information and opinions on policy issues, legislative and non-legislative initiatives.
- 2 The author is an advisor to the Committee on EU Affairs of the Senate of Parliament of the Czech Republic and participated in the administration of some of the parliamentary activities referred to in this chapter. The views and opinions expressed in this chapter are solely those of the author and not of the author's employer.
- 3 Interview 1, 2023.
- 4 Interview 2, 2023.
- 5 However, Seitlová was also disenchanted by organisational problems encountered during the CoFoE, such as lack of translation into all EU languages in the meetings of the Working Groups and components (especially in 2021).
- 6 See endnote 5.
- 7 Interview 1, 2023 and Interview 2, 2023 as well as the author's recollections.

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List of Interviews

- Interview 1, 2023: Interview with a member of EAC Secretariat, Chancellery of the Chamber of Deputies, 24 October 2023.
- Interview 2, 2023: interview with Head of EU Unit in the Senate Chancellery, 2 May 2023.

7 The Swedish *Riksdag* in the Conference on the Future of Europe

Defending the Status Quo

Petr Kaniok

Introduction

Sweden's relationship with the European Union (EU) has been turbulent at times, undergoing many changes. ¹ After joining the EU in 1995, Sweden was described as a reluctant and foot-dragging country in its first years of membership (e.g., Lindahl and Naurin, 2005). This approach slowly started to change from the beginning of the new millennium. Particularly during the tenures of centre-right cabinets, the country adopted a more positive attitude towards the EU that can be characterised as pragmatic support. A majority of the Swedish relevant political parties perceive the EU in terms of intergovernmentalism, making support for federal or neo-functional visions of the EU as a 'minority report' within Swedish party politics (Rosnes, 2022). Thus, the prevailing intergovernmental pro-EU approach amongst Swedish mainstream parties renders EU affairs a non-competitive issue in terms of vying for voter support (Persson, Karlsson, and Mårtensson, 2023).

In this context, Swedish expectations and its position related to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) can be deemed as perfectly aligned with the country's broader EU policy. As Lewander (2021) puts it, Sweden was far away from having an enthusiastic EU reform-supporting position with respect to the Conference. Instead, the Swedish purpose was policy-oriented and focused on an inclusive and transparent Citizens' Dialogue, without creating new legal obligations for EU members. This relatively low-profile position was reinforced by Sweden signing a non-paper with 11 other member states² outlining their main focus and preferences regarding the CoFoE. The group argued for a more restrictive mandate for the Conference and for excluding the possibility of treaty revisions from its scope. In fact, any substantive institutional change of the EU decision-making architecture was not perceived as necessary or welcome. Such a stance meant that Sweden had a stake in the CoFoE, albeit in defending the institutional status quo.

At the same time, similarly to Czechia and France, the CoFoE coincided to some extent with the Swedish EU Council Presidency held in the first half of 2023. While the timing of the CoFoE did not overlap with the Swedish mandate itself, the fact that Sweden was a part of the French-Czech-Swedish Presidency Trio, required it to be involved, to a certain degree, in the preparatory work and follow-up activities related to the Conference. Additionally, the CoFoE was relevant for

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the parliamentary dimension of the Swedish presidency through the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) trio formats.

Even though the *Riksdag* ranks among one of the most ambitious and active chambers in the field of EU affairs (Auel, 2018), combining various functions concerning the EU policy (see below), this does not imply that it was going to play an active and entrepreneurial role within the CoFoE by, for example, promoting a stronger position of the national parliaments within the EU or any other significant institutional changes. The rather conservative position which the country took with regard to the ambitious objectives of the CoFoE was also pursued by the Swedish parliament and reflected the *Riksdag*'s long-term approach to EU affairs. As the chapter reveals, *Riksdag*'s handling of the CoFoE focused on defending the status quo in the EU political architecture and actively using the available scrutiny and mandating instruments – traditionally used in the Swedish EU policy – to this aim.

The chapter is organised as follows. First, the political and institutional context in which the *Riksdag* operated during the CoFoE is provided. After that, a section analysing the *Riksdag*'s approach towards the Conference, the composition of its delegation, delegates' activities, and reporting back to the *Riksdag* follows. The third part evaluates the CoFoE follow-up in *Riksdag* in the context of its EU Presidency. The chapter concludes with the final evaluation of the *Riksdag*'s role in the CoFoE, placing it into the broader context of the parliamentary practice and general Swedish EU policy.

The Contextual Factors of the Swedish Engagement in CoFoE

Institutional and Political Context

The direct Swedish parliamentary experience with the EU started in 1995, when the country joined the EU. Taking into account the extent of control, mechanisms of influence at hand as well as their binding nature, the Swedish unicameral parliament – *Riksdag* – is classified as one of the formally strongest chambers in the EU (Auel, Rozenberg, and Tacea, 2015; Karlas, 2012; Winzen, 2012). This position is further enhanced by political reality – Sweden has a remarkable tradition of minority cabinets. This requires the government – whether led by the centre-left or centre-right party – to cooperate closely with the often fragmented, yet strong opposition. In recent years, things in Swedish politics have been even more complicated by the rising strength of the far-right Swedish Democrats (*Sveriges Demokraterna* (SD)), a party whom the traditional left and right parties have tried to exclude from power participation through the *cordon sanitaire* since SD's breakthrough in the parliamentary election in 2010 (Aylott and Bolin, 2019; Kenes, 2020).

Regarding the practical handling of EU affairs, the Swedish parliament combines various ideal types, as suggested by Rozenberg and Hefftlar (2015). Hegeland (2015) classifies the *Riksdag* as coming closest to the type of a 'policy shaper' – a parliament that aims to proactively influence the formulation of EU

policies through mandating the position of the government in EU-level negotiations in the Council. To this end, the Swedish parliament benefits from strong formal powers which allow it to bind the executive with its opinions. In the policy shaping parliaments and chambers, EU affairs committees have a strong standing in the parliament's EU policy infrastructure (Rozenberg and Heffler, 2015, 31–32). Indeed, the key player in the Swedish EU policy is the EU affairs committee (*EU nämnden*), established in 1995, but other sectoral committees also have their roles in this field (Hegeland, 2015).

According to Hegeland (2015), apart from ‘policy shaper’, some essential elements of the other ideal types are also present in the Swedish case. These are the ‘government watchdog’ – which favours political control over policy influence, the ‘public forum’ – focusing on contact with citizens and holding public debates in a deliberative format, and the ‘European player’ – a parliament which invests in direct contacts and networking with EU institutions. All these elements can be found in the Swedish case, albeit to a smaller degree than in the case of the ‘policy shaper’ type.

In political practice post-Lisbon, the *Riksdag* has focused mainly on the subsidiarity control, which is, in the Swedish case, quite resources-consuming, for example, in terms of engaging the sectoral committees (Cornell, 2016). The latter ones are the most important players in the quest for subsidiarity control, while the EU affairs committee plays virtually no role (Hegeland, 2015, 432). This setup has established the *Riksdag*'s reputation a strong and active subsidiarity player (Auel, 2018). At the same time, in recent years EU affairs have not been a highly politicised issue in the domestic parliamentary context as they have not represented the conflict line in the Swedish politics (Hegeland, 2015, 428). On the other hand, some analyses argue that the conflicts, particularly in the *Riksdag*'s EU affairs committee, have increased, and the government has been more contested by its legislature in this field (Karlsson, Mårtensson, and Persson, 2018).

Geopolitical and Global Context

The *Riksdag*'s handling of the CoFoE was to a large extent affected by the external geopolitical context. First, the pandemic, which took a prominent place in the Swedish daily politics, negatively affected the *Riksdag*'s interest and capacity to engage in the CoFoE. While some scholars argue that the Covid-19 pandemic “re-ignited the calls for the Conference from various actors” in order to find common solutions to transnational problems (Fabbrini, 2021, 402), this was not the case of Sweden and the *Riksdag*. Sweden chose a different approach to dealing with the pandemic – more liberal and less restrictive than any other EU member states – which affected its low interest in pursuing common EU-level solutions. When the pandemic as a political priority was over, another global challenge replaced it. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine starting in February 2022 was specific for Sweden. The country's proximity to Russia and the Russian imperialistic rhetoric very quickly called traditional Swedish neutrality into question already in the first weeks of the aggression. In this respect, security-oriented debates

dominated the Swedish political discussion, relegating the process of CoFoE to the second plan.

At the same time, however, a systematic scrutiny of the CoFoE perceived as an EU-driven activity, more or less explicitly designed to deepen EU integration and further empower the EU institutions (see Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis in this book), also took place in the Swedish parliament. This scrutiny was accompanied by a regular dialogue with the government. Additionally, the relatively weak position of the Social Democratic/Green minority cabinet that was in charge during the CoFoE, increased the incentive to exercise its ‘government watchdog’ and ‘policy shaper’ roles. At the same time, it has to be noted that due to *Riksdag*’s formally strong position in domestic EU affairs, the chamber did not perceive the CoFoE as an opportunity to further boost its own prerogatives in this field. Unlike in case of the French National Assembly and the Senate (see Chapter 5, by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book) the *Riksdag* did not take an active position in promoting the national parliament’s empowerment within the CoFoE agenda.

Swedish Parliament’s Political Composition during CoFoE

Swedish domestic politics did not impact parliamentary participation in the Conference in any significant way. As a result of the 2018 parliamentary elections, Sweden had a so-called ‘hung’ parliament. The traditional parties approached the elections in two broad blocs – the centre-right Alliance (*Aliansen*), consisting of four parties (Moderates, the Liberals, the Centre Party, and the Christian Democrats) and the even more informal Red-Green (*Röd-Gröna*) bloc consisting of Social Democrats (S) and the Green Party. Despite the fact that these formations did not run as an electoral coalition – each party ran on its own – their presence signalled to the voters the willingness of particular parties to cooperate and agree on the most relevant political issues. The SD and the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet* (V)) stood aside from any bloc.

As a result, the election produced a marginal victory for the Red-Green bloc (including the seats obtained by the Left Party), and forming the new cabinet took a very long time. After several rounds of turbulent negotiations, more than five times the duration of any previous government formation, on 18 January 2018, Stefan Löfven (S) was finally confirmed as prime minister. The Centre (*Centerpartiet* (C)), the Liberals (*Liberalerna* (L)), and the V abstained, which counted as acceptance. Party discipline in the vote was nearly complete (Aylott and Bolin, 2019). However, the cabinet consisting of S and the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet de gröna*, (MiP)) held only 116 out of 349 seats (33%), making it one of the most minor minority governments in Swedish history.

The *Riksdag* composition in the period 2018–2022 (see Table 7.1) resulted in a parliament that was not in favour of rapid deepening of the EU integration. Even though the minority coalition faced several internal problems³ during the 2018–2022 period, they did not affect Swedish EU policy or the *Riksdag* as such. The subsequent parliamentary elections⁴ took place after the end of the CoFoE, in

Table 7.1 The Swedish parliament and government during CoFoE.

<i>Political party</i>	<i>European political party group</i>	<i>Mandates</i>	<i>Government / Opposition</i>
S (<i>Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti</i>)	Party of European Socialists (S&D)	100/349	G
M (<i>Moderata samlingspartiet / Moderaterna</i>)	European People's Party (EPP)	70/349	O
SD (<i>Sverigedemokraterna</i>)	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	62/349	O
C (<i>Centerpartiet</i>)	Renew Europe	31/349	O
V (<i>Vänsterpartiet</i>)	The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)	28/349	O
KD (<i>Kristdemokraterna</i>)	EPP	22/349	O
L (<i>Liberalerna</i>)	Renew Europe	20/349	O
MiP (<i>Miljöpartiet de gröna</i>)	Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens–EFA)	16/349	G

Source: Author's own.

September 2022. European integration or the future of the EU was not a significant issue in the electoral campaign before that ballot.

Riksdag's Involvement in the CoFoE

Composition of Parliamentary Delegation

As Table 7.2 suggests, the Swedish delegation to the CoFoE included an equal number of government and opposition Members of Parliament (MPs). The delegation consisted of the Chair of the EU committee, members of the same committee, and other MPs.

The process of selection was as follows. On 4 June 2021, the *Riksdag's* President decided on the nomination of the four members who would participate in the Plenary sessions of the CoFoE. The decision was taken after the Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Constitutional Committee, and the EU Committee agreed on how to allocate the four seats, and which members from those committees would participate. Whereas the first two committees sent one delegate each (Hans Rothenberg for the Foreign Affairs Committee and Daniel Andersson for the Constitutional Committee), the EU Affairs Committee (EAC) got two places (Jessica Rosswall, Anna Vikström). The decision was communicated to the Secretariat of the Conference on the same day.⁶

Parliamentary Approach Towards the CoFoE

The most usual – almost exclusive context – in which the CoFoE was debated in the EAC was when the government was providing information on the Swedish

Table 7.2 CoFoE Plenary members from the Swedish *Riksdag*.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
Daniel Andersson	Government	Values and Rights, the Rule of Law, Security	<i>Socialdemokraterna</i>	S&D
Jessika Rosswall	Opposition	Digital Transformation	<i>Moderaterna</i>	EPP
Hans Rothenberg	Opposition	European Democracy	<i>Moderaterna</i>	EPP
Anna Vikström	Government	Health	<i>Socialdemokraterna</i>	S&D

Source: Author's own.⁵

EU policy developments. In line with the well-established executive-legislative accountability relationship in Sweden, the EU Minister informed the committee members on the course of the European Council meeting where the CoFoE was included. Quite often, reporting on the CoFoE's state of play represented an independent item in the committee's agenda. Again, even such discussions were driven by governmental reports on the Swedish EU policy and were held in an informative manner. The tone of the discussions was cooperative, with the opposition and the governmental MPs expressing almost the same stances.

Within the *Riksdag*, the CoFoE was predominantly discussed in the EAC, for the first time on 9 December 2019, well ahead of the launch of the process. During that meeting,⁷ EU minister Hans Dahlgren (S) informed the committee about the first discussion that had taken place in the European Council (Riksdagen, 2019a). Two days later, then-Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (S) outlined the substance of the government position on the issue,⁸ being that the Conference should not focus on the institutional issues and should not lead to the changes in EU primary law (Riksdagen, 2019b). Subsequently, the same message was reiterated by PM Löfven at the *Riksdag*'s Plenary meeting on 17 December 2019 (Riksdagen, 2019c). This was in line with two basic assumptions that *Riksdag* had taken prior to the Conference – first, that the CoFoE should avoid discussing the power distribution within the EU; second, that it should be a tool complementary to representative democracy (COSAC, 2021).

The Swedish parliamentary position towards the CoFoE could be characterised as quite unified, with political parties representing a similar, moderate attitude, albeit for different reasons. Almost all actors who discussed any form of *Riksdag*'s involvement in the CoFoE shared a rather reserved approach towards that undertaking (COSAC, 2021). In this regard, the cabinet could rely on the *Riksdag*'s support even though some smaller differences existed there, as for example some parties were even more critical towards the CoFoE than was the government. In this sense, the parliamentary attitude could be characterised as sceptical

but unproblematic as the issue did not raise controversy among relevant political parties or between the legislature and the executive.

Prior to the CoFoE launch, the EAC touched upon this issue, more or less, during its 14 meetings. The preparatory phase engaged only limited number of MPs. Each party usually expressed its position through one MP, quite often the same MP who repeated at the plenary the stance previously delivered at the committee level.

A quite intensive debate took place already in January 2020, when the relevant political parties expressed their initial position on the Conference. Whereas the Moderates, Centre Party, the Greens and Social Democrats supported the reserved governmental stance – particularly on the institutional issues, which should not be the substance of CoFoE’s deliberations – the Left Party and the Swedish Democrats expressed straightforward opposition to the very idea of the that participatory experiment. For example, the Left Party’s MP Ilona Szatmari Waldau argued this:

The Left Party does not support the government’s position as we believe that representative democracy is based on elected representatives and national parliaments, not statistical samples of the population. The EU conference method has been tried before without good results. Here I want to be clear that what we mean is that the government in the Council should try to stop the Conference. But if this is not possible and the Conference will go ahead, the government’s position is a good one.

(Riksdagen, 2020a)

Such a statement from a party on the left side of the political spectrum might be especially surprising, considering that the European Left (GUE/NGL) endorsed the CoFoE as a tool of participatory democracy aimed at reforming and further integrating the EU (see Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this book). A similar stance was also articulated in a position of the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC, *Utrikesutskottet*) which explicitly underlined the role of national parliaments in the process by stating this:

National parliaments need to be closely involved with work on the Conference. The Committee wishes to stress that national parliaments, political parties and elected representatives at both the local and regional level can carry on a dialogue based on representativeness that needs to be made good use of within the framework of the Conference. The Committee considers that parliaments elected by the people in general elections are the way of channelling the will of the people which has the highest legitimacy in European democracy.

(Riksdagen, 2020b)

Such statements illustrate a clear, perceived legitimacy clash between participatory and representative dimensions of the EU democracy expressed by the parliamentary representatives. Within the Swedish political discourse, only the Liberals endorsed the idea to use the CoFoE as a tool to further democratise the EU – through the

empowerment of the European Parliament – and criticised the government for not sharing this idea (Riksdagen, 2020a).

While the role of the FAC was remarkably minor compared to the EAC's involvement, both committees reasoned from a similar reserved stance. Already in January 2020, when EU minister Hans Dahlgren first presented the CoFoE and the Swedish position on it to the FAC, the latter supported the careful governmental approach. Three political parties (V, L, and SD) expressed some reservations about the committee's opinion, but only L required a more constructive and pro-EU approach (Riksdagen, 2020c). The committee's position was then repeated in March 2020 when it expressed scepticism of too-ambitious plans of the CoFoE, arguing that it should be just a complementary activity to representative democracy and should not lead to any changes of the EU primary law (Riksdagen, 2020b).

Riksdag's plenary discussed the preparation of the CoFoE three times. Apart from the purely informative take from the then Prime Minister Stefan Löfven in December 2019, the more substantive discussion occurred in March 2020. Here, the idea of the Conference was discussed within the framework of the Swedish Parliament's debate on the Commission's work programme for 2020. The majority of the MPs who participated in the discussion emphasised the mere consultative character of the CoFoE and the primacy of representative democracy over participatory mechanisms (Riksdagen, 2020d). In this context, the following statement of Moderates' MP Hans Rothenberg, one of the *Riksdag's* delegates to the CoFoE Plenary, resonates with the previously mentioned scepticism towards deliberative experiments excluding parliamentary actors:

But let's make it clear that the EU has more important things to deal with than countless more seminars and summits. There is of course nothing wrong with discussing and trying to revitalise the debate on the future of Europe. We welcome the initiative for a Conference on the future of Europe. But it is also important to ensure that this does not become a mere discussion club. Another round of discussions on the idea of alienating ordinary citizens may even lead to this becoming a reality. It is therefore important to emphasise that national parliaments should have a role in this Conference. They usually have more and better ground contact than the European Parliament.

(Riksdagen, 2020d)

Before the March debate, the CoFoE was a topic of one interpellation that Ludwig Aspling (SD) addressed to EU Minister Dahlgren. Its content repeated the SD's previously expressed preference for representative democracy and reluctance to changing the EU primary law (Riksdagen, 2020e).

During the workings of the Conference (April 2021–May 2022), the EAC debated the CoFoE nine times which, excluding the summer holidays, meant on average once a month. The approach was very similar to the preparatory stage: the governmental reporting on the progress and news were typically followed by the MPs from both the governmental and opposition parties posing questions or commenting on the report. The atmosphere during the exchanges was cooperative

among the MPs who usually supported the governmental approach. If reservations were raised, they were even more critical towards the CoFoE than the reserved governmental stance. For example, in October 2021 Daniel Riazat, the Left Party MP criticised the CoFoE as follows:

The issue of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the way it is organised has been discussed before. Even then, the Left Party has opposed to this. We simply believe that representative democracy should be based on elected representatives. There is nothing to suggest that this Conference could replace this in a good way.

(Riksdagen, 2021a)

Concerning the other committees, in December 2021 the Committee on the Constitution repeated its previous position, namely concerning the CoFoE's ambitions and goals when discussing the Commission work programme for 2022 (Riksdagen, 2021b). The other committees did not comment on the CoFoE during that stage.

During the CoFoE's work, the *Riksdag* Plenary focused on it just once. In December 2021 during the discussion on the Commission's work programme for 2022, CoFoE was criticised by the Left Party and The Moderates, two parties standing on opposite poles of Swedish politics – thus uniting the Swedish party politics in the broadest sense. The Moderate Hans Rothenberg (M) criticised the CoFoE process as a “total fiasco”, explicitly supporting the sceptical approach previously expressed by the Left Party MPs (Riksdagen, 2021c). Regarding MPs' personal participation in the CoFoE, each delegate attended 50–75 per cent of the Conference's meetings on average. The delegation and individual MPs reported back to the house only occasionally. They usually did so through oral reporting to the EAC in the presence of the EU Minister (COSAC, 2022a). The number of the MPs who participated in these parliamentary discussions was relatively small. In a similar vein, *Riksdag* did not hold any CoFoE-related hearings with EU-level political actors like Members of European Parliament (MEPs) or the members of the European Commission (COSAC, 2022a, 2022b).

With regards to the parliamentary engagement with the citizens, even though Swedish MPs repeatedly emphasised the role of the general public within the CoFoE, both before and during the Conference, the *Riksdag* did not organise any CoFoE-related event for the public, which would include civil society or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

***Riksdagen* after the CoFoE: Sceptical Evaluation**

After the conclusion of the CoFoE in May 2022, the *Riksdag* discussed its final outcome within the same institutional framework as in the previous phases – the European Affairs Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Plenary. Not surprisingly, the most prominent platform was the EAC, which discussed the CoFoE's outcomes quite extensively. From the end of the Conference in May

2022 until the end of that year, the issue appeared on the EAC agenda seven times: approximately once a month. Immediately after the CoFoE's closing event, in view of the European Parliament's call for initiating the Convention to discuss the treaty changes (European Parliament, 2022), the EAC repeatedly supported the most important governmental position not to open the EU primary law and carry out the necessary reforms within the existing legal framework (Riksdagen, 2022a). The issue of potential treaty changes was the most important and frequently discussed one in the parliamentary venue during the follow-up phase. The domestic political actors' positions did not change in this respect throughout the Conference process – almost all the parties supported the governmental line, and only Liberals kept their openness to initiating treaty revisions. In general, the EAC's evaluation of the CoFoE was rather lukewarm. It argued that the CoFoE was marked by poor planning and conflicting information regarding its expectations. Moreover, the committee found it difficult to see the conclusions as representative of EU citizens. Yet, despite these critical remarks the EAC did not adopt any final resolution regarding the CoFoE (COSAC, 2022a).

The Foreign Affairs Committee debated the CoFoE's outcomes in April 2022 when it evaluated the report on the cooperation in the EU in the previous year. Its feedback was even more critical. The committee, for example, accused the CoFoE of poor planning, insufficient management, or contradictory ambitions, all of which was reflected in the problematic outcomes of the CoFoE:

With regard to the Conference on the Future, the Committee notes that the work has been characterised by inadequate planning and conflicting information about the conditions of its work. To some extent, this can be attributed to the uncertainty about how the pandemic would develop and the need to adapt the work to various infection control restrictions. However, the main reason, in the committee's view, is the lack of clarity in the Conference's mandate and weak governance. The ambiguity and laxity surrounding the appointment of the citizens' representation in the Conference Plenary and the European Citizens' Panels is a serious shortcoming. The available data on the activity of the multi-lingual platform also suggests significant imbalances in terms of the gender, age and educational level of participants. This means that the Committee has been reinforced in its previously expressed view that it is difficult to see that the conclusions of the Conference can be considered representative of the EU's citizens and thus requiring to be followed up,

(Riksdagen, 2022b 31)

Subsequently, the FAC discussed the CoFoE in the context of the debate on the European Commission's Work programme for 2023. In a similar vein to the EAC, the committee requested that any reform proposed by the CoFoE must take place within the existing EU constitutional framework. It rejected the European Parliament's (EP's) proposal adopted in June 2022 to change the EU primary law. Again, only the Swedish Liberals took a different position (Riksdagen, 2022c).

Finally, the plenary discussed the CoFoE's results right after its closing. Already on 5 May 2022, the *Riksdagen* debated the CoFoE's outcomes and its representativeness in a rather short exchange between EU Minister Hans Dahlgren and Hans Rothenberg (Moderates). Again, the opposition's and government's approaches did not differ as the following reply of EU Minister Dahlgren suggests:

I thank Mr Rothenberg for the question and for the accompanying comment, with which I can largely agree. The government has emphasised throughout the Conference that it must not be perceived as a decision-making body. We cannot know whether the randomly selected citizens are representative of the European population, and the Council has always stated that it will not take a position on the proposals at the Conference itself. When the randomly selected citizens' panels' ideas on how to make changes are on the table, we will decide what can be taken forward to into our own work on the future of EU decision-making.

(Riksdagen, 2022a)

The Plenary next discussed the CoFoE in June 2022 and in December 2022, when *Riksdagen* discussed the Commission's work programme for 2023 (Riksdagen, 2022d, 2022e). In total, the Plenary discussed the CoFoE's outcomes three times during the follow-up phase. All debates had very similar sceptical tones emphasising certain weaknesses of the process such as inadequate representativeness and quality of CoFoE's organisation, while criticising the attempts towards the primary law change. During that stage, one parliamentary written question was submitted, by Jessika Rosswall (M), addressed to Hans Dahlgren. It concerned the Swedish EU minister's participation in CoFoE (Riksdagen, 2022f).

Given the context of the Swedish position towards the CoFoE, it is not surprising that the process of its follow-up did not belong among the top Swedish EU Presidency priorities. The *Riksdag*'s approach echoed this and remained silent with regards to the impact of the CoFoE on the EU reform agenda also during its parliamentary presidency dimension. The CoFoE was briefly discussed only during the meeting of the COSAC chairpersons, which took place in Stockholm in January 2023. However, the issue was raised, not by the *Riksdag*'s representatives as the Swedish initiative, but by the EP Vice-President Othmar Karas, who stressed the importance of the CoFoE's results, acknowledging that there are different opinions among the national parliaments as well as member states in general on the CoFoE's role (COSAC, 2023).

To sum up, while unlike other parliaments (see Chapter 5 Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book), the *Riksdag* did not adopt a formal position on the substantive proposals produced by the CoFoE, it expressed formal objections in form of reasoned opinions to both the EP's proposed amendments to the Electoral Act and the proposal for a regulation on the election of the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage (reasoned opinions 2016 and 2022). The *Riksdag* also criticised proposals on a shift from unanimous decision-making to decisions by a qualified majority – for example, in taxation matters. The Committee

Table 7.3 Parliamentary activities of the Swedish parliament related to CoFoE.

Plenary debates	Parliamentary questions	Resolutions	Committee meetings / debates	Parliamentary information report	Press releases	Events	Hearings
7	2	0	36	0	0	0	0

Source: Author's own.⁹

on the Constitution emphasised, however, the importance of increased openness and insight into the EU's decision-making processes, for instance, regarding the trialogues, in line with CoFoE's recommendations (COSAC, 2022a).

As Table 7.3 suggests, the *Riksdag*'s handling of the CoFoE took place only within the chamber as such. No available source indicates that there was any public event linking the *Riksdag* with the citizens in the context of the Conference. There was also no press release that would address the CoFoE from the *Riksdag*'s point of view.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis confirms that the CoFoE did not represent a politically salient issue for the Swedish parliament in the broadest sense. The *Riksdag* – along with the Swedish cabinet – adopted a rather defensive and pragmatic stance towards the Conference based on treating it as a deliberative exercise with no binding influence on the course on the EU institutional evolution. They both promoted the view that many necessary reforms can be conducted within the current treaty framework and should be based on improving the effectiveness of the current EU policies as well as on increasing the transparency of EU policy-making. This ‘hold the door’ approach lasted over the CoFoE's work and affected the way the *Riksdag* reflected on the CoFoE's results.

First, the *Riksdag* exercised only some of its EU-oriented roles discussed in the first part of the chapter. Most conspicuously, it acted as the ‘government watchdog’ and, albeit to a lesser extent, a ‘policy shaper’. In this sense, the Swedish parliament closely followed the governmental approach towards the CoFoE during the regular dialogue with the executive during the ex-ante and ex-post European Council meetings. The reporting format was the most important framework in which the *Riksdag* handled the CoFoE illustrating Sweden's strongly institutionalised accountability arrangements between the government and the parliament. As both the *Riksdag*'s and the cabinet's approach towards the CoFoE were convergent since the very idea of the Conference became public, there was no need for the former to issue any detailed mandates.¹⁰

The ‘public forum’ role was fulfilled by the *Riksdag*'s in the CoFoE's context only partly. All materials regarding the *Riksdag*'s handling of the CoFoE were publicly available, particularly as the EU affairs committee was concerned, and the

parliament held seven plenary debates on the topic. On the other hand, although both the parliament and its MPs repeatedly presented the CoFoE as a forum that should boost the dialogue between the EU and the citizens, as well as portrayed national parliaments as those responsible for carrying out this dialogue, the *Riksdag* did not carry out any activities in this regard. There were no public events promoting the CoFoE to the broader public, and no national consultations were organised by the *Riksdag* in this respect.

In a similar vein, *Riksdag* cannot be identified as a ‘European player’ in the context of CoFoE as it was not pro-active in any kind of inter-parliamentary cooperation around the Conference, or when it was part of the COSAC trio. But given the initial position the *Riksdag* had adopted prior the CoFoE started, such low-profile stance was understandable.

The combination of the three identified roles – ‘government watchdog’, ‘policy shaper’, and partly ‘public forum’ – allowed the *Riksdag* to actively push for its goal to limit the impact of the CoFoE as an EU institutional reform hub as much as possible. This ‘defending the status quo’ agenda was achieved through a continuous sceptical rhetoric of Swedish MPs during the whole process, downplaying the impact of the deliberative exercise, and taking a reserved position towards potential reforms affecting the current institutional balance in the EU. The *Riksdag*’s ‘active defence’ was reinforced by the relatively coherent parliamentary position across the political spectrum and the alignment between the parliamentary and executive stances in this respect.¹¹

The only party with an alternative stance was the Liberals, who initially required a more active, constructive and pro-EU position from the Swedish government, yet their role in the process was somewhat symbolic as their party group was the smallest in the *Riksdag* during the CoFoE. In this context, the findings of this chapter stay in line with Hegeland (2015, 428) who argued that, in Sweden, there is more consensus on the EU agenda than on the domestic politics.

In case of the CoFoE, two contextual factors further influenced parliamentary stance towards its process. Starting with the Covid-19 pandemic and ending with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the outbreak of war, these two events largely contributed to the turbulent broader political context which overshadowed the course of the Conference. The *Riksdag* worked remotely during a substantial period of the pandemic – including many debates on the CoFoE – which affected the scope of issues it covered and the quality of the discussions. Then, the closing of the CoFoE was drowned out by the first weeks of the war in Ukraine and developing the EU’s common position in this respect. In this regard, the CoFoE was a victim of bad timing.

Last but not least, the CoFoE had no politicisation potential in the Swedish EU debate and no party could win any gains from profiling it. The de-politicised character caused by the context where other pertinent issues prevailed and by the consensus on the matter was reinforced by the limited number of political entrepreneurs participating in the issue. One could of course argue that the political parties could have played the CoFoE out in domestic politics to show to the voters that they can

‘protect the country’s sovereignty and the status quo in EU affairs against some radical attempts by federalists’. But given the already mentioned general low salience of the EU politics for the Swedish voters and the pressuring context created by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war, this card would have been of a very low value.

Notes

- 1 This research was supported by the NPO “Systemic Risk Institute” no. LX22NPO5101, funded by European Union – Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, NPO: EXCELES).
- 2 The group included Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands and Slovakia.
- 3 It was particularly the 2021 government crisis when the *Riksdag* in June ousted then Prime Minister Stefan Löfven with a no-confidence vote. Löfven was, however, able to form a new cabinet on the same political basis in July 2021 (Aylott and Bolin, 2023).
- 4 The 2022 parliamentary election took place in September. It resulted in an important change in Swedish party politics as the results of the election broke previously existing *cordon sanitaire*. For details, see Aylott and Bolin, 2023.
- 5 On the basis of riksdagen.se
- 6 E-mail from the *Riksdag*’s employee from 2 February 2024.
- 7 The meeting was preceded by a written question submitted to the EU minister Hans Dahlgren by an opposition MP P. Jonsson, inquiring about the government’s general position at the conference (Riksdagen, 2019d).
- 8 The substance of the Swedish position can be found in Regeringskansliet (2020).
- 9 See endnote v (5).
- 10 Sweden along with other 12 countries repeated its reserved stance in the other non-paper issued in 4th May 2022 (von Ondarza and Ålander, 2022).
- 11 This position was repeated by another non-paper when Sweden joined another 12 countries (von Ondarza and Ålander, 2022). In this non-paper that was published on 9 May 2022 the treaty amendments were, for example, completely excluded.

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8 Spanish Parliamentary Involvement in the CoFoE

Between European Political Entrepreneurs and Depoliticised Domestic Politics

Alvaro Oleart

Introduction

French President Emmanuel Macron had already championed the idea of listening ‘directly’ to citizens through *Le Grand Débat* and the French Citizens Convention for Climate when, in July 2019, European Commission presidential candidate Ursula Von der Leyen proposed to the European Parliament the concept of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Von der Leyen’s proposal was intended to gain political support for parliamentary approval of the Commission that July.

Von der Leyen promised the CoFoE would be a two-year participatory democracy exercise that would collect recommendations by ‘citizens’ about what the future of Europe should be. In her speech as President-elect of the European Commission, Von der Leyen suggested that the CoFoE “should be inclusive for all institutions and citizens and the European Parliament should have a leading role” (European Commission, 2019; see Oleart, 2023a). After many months of negotiations between the European Commission, Council, and Parliament, on 10 March 2021 the three European Union (EU) institutions signed the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe, entitled ‘Engaging with Citizens for Democracy’:

We will seize the opportunity to underpin the democratic legitimacy and functioning of the European project as well as to uphold the EU citizens support for our common goals and values, by giving them further opportunities to express themselves. [...] The Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union. It will give citizens a greater role in shaping the Union’s future policies and ambitions, improving its resilience.

(European Commission, 2021, 1–2, emphasis added)

Now, which citizens are meant to participate in the CoFoE, and through which channels? What are the roles of national and regional parliaments? Such questions

remained ambiguous throughout the parliamentary negotiation process, and this is particularly relevant when considering the role of national and regional parliamentary actors. As argued by the editors of this book, the CoFoE was an opportunity structure for the European Parliament (EP) and its national counterparts to reclaim their roles in the EU political system, even if the EP operated from a much more powerful position, as it was not only involved in the CoFoE Plenary, but also in its overall governance. This leads us to the empirical research question this chapter addresses: How did the Spanish parliamentary actors, including the Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), operate politically within the CoFoE? In this way, the chapter accounts for the institutional, inter-institutional, and party-political dimensions of the parliamentary activity in the CoFoE, as well as the emergence of individual political entrepreneurs.

As a longstanding pro-EU country, mostly because of the perception that European integration was a path to modernity post-Franco (see Díez Medrano, 2003), Spain's EU affairs traditionally have not been politicised. This began to change during the 2011 *Indignados* movement, where a strongly decentralised network of alter-globalisation, youth, and Internet activists (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) introduced a strong European dimension, especially in relation to austerity policies. The debate surrounding Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) during the mid-2010s also triggered wide engagement in the Spanish parliamentary and civil society arenas (Bouza and Oleart, 2018; Oleart, 2021), as well as the NextGenEU Covid recovery fund (Oleart and Gheyle, 2022). Thus, the Spanish political arena appears as an increasingly fertile ground for vibrant debate about the future of Europe. Furthermore, the Spanish government was constituted at the time by a coalition of left-wing *Unidas Podemos* (UP) and centre-left *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) (see Oleart, 2023b), who, in spite of their differences, generally shared a pro-EU vision – albeit certainly more critical on the side of UP. As a coalition minority government, they needed the regular support of other parties, such as regional left-wing and centre-right parties from Catalonia and the Basque Country (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), *Junts x Catalunya*, *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (EAJ-PNV) and *Euskal Herria Bildu* (EH Bildu)). This is particularly the case in European affairs, an arena in which typically there has been a broad political consensus, also with the main Spanish opposition party throughout the CoFoE, the *Partido Popular* (PP). Table 8.1 summarises the Spanish political parties' characteristics and their parliamentary strength during the 2019–2023 Spanish legislature. Parties are overwhelmingly pro-EU, with the exception of the extreme right *Vox* (see Rooduijn et al., 2023), an anti-immigration party that supports a 'Europe of nations', and *Unidas Podemos*, ERC and EH Bildu, who broadly support a more social Europe that prioritises social justice to economic (neo)liberalism.

In terms of the relationship between the two national parliamentary institutions in Spain, the *Congreso de los Diputados* (*Congreso*) and the Senate,

Table 8.1 Spanish political parties in the legislature (2019–2023) with more than five MPs.

<i>Party</i>	<i>EU Political Group</i>	<i>Seats in the Congreso</i>	<i>Seats in the Senate</i>	<i>Left-right positioning</i>	<i>Stance on the EU</i>
PSOE	Progressive alliance of Socialist and Democrats(S&D)	120	114	Left	Pro-Europeanism
<i>Partido Popular</i>	European People's Party (EPP)	88	100	Right	Pro-Europeanism
<i>Vox</i>	European Conservatives and Reformists	52	3	Extreme Right	'Europe of nations'
<i>Unidas Podemos / Izquierda Confederal</i>	The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL) and Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA)	33	6	Centre	Alter-Europeanism
<i>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya</i>	Group of the Greens-European Free Alliance	13	14	Centre-Left	Alter-Europeanism
<i>Junts x Catalunya</i>	Not affiliated	8	5	Right	Pro-Europeanism
<i>Ciudadanos</i>	Renew Europe (Renew)	9	3	Centre-Right	Pro-Europeanism
EAJ-PNV	Renew	6	10	Centre-Right	Pro-Europeanism
EH Bildu	The Left – GUE/NGL	5	2	Left	Alter-Europeanism

Source: Author's own.

the former is the main political body that elects the national government while the latter operates primarily as a space of regional representation. The executive–legislative relationship is primarily developed between the national government and the *Congreso*, while the Senate is a territorial chamber with a less prominent political position in comparison to the parliament. However, when engaging in EU affairs (for a full overview of the Spanish chambers’ institutional strength and parliamentary activities in EU affairs, see Kölling and Molina, 2015), both chambers are highly relevant given the multi-level nature of the EU political system. Accordingly, the main EU parliamentary committee in Spain, the Mixed Committee for the European Union, belongs both to the *Congreso* and the Senate.

Overall, this chapter analyses the ways in which the Spanish parliamentary field engaged with the CoFoE and contributes to the underlying goal of this volume to explore the ways in which the European Parliament and member states’ have engaged with it. As national parliaments are key intermediators – mediating between citizens and EU institutions, their role is crucial for EU democracy, even if they were conceived primarily as guests in the CoFoE. The chapter falls under an interpretivist methodological perspective, based on a combination of participant observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviews. All the quotes (beyond the interviews) are taken from parliamentary sessions in the Mixed Committee for the EU dedicated to the CoFoE.

The Spanish Parliamentary Field Meets the CoFoE – a Multi-level Political Engagement

The parliamentary engagement in Spain in the context of the CoFoE followed two distinct paths that were rarely connected. This engagement responds to the EU’s ‘Multi-level Parliamentary Field’ concept, in which democratic representation “is more disaggregated than a full-fledged EU-federal representative system would have been” (Crum and Fossum, 2009, 261). This allows for national parliamentarians to work in a space relatively autonomous from European parliamentarians, while at the same time being loosely connected. Thus, the CoFoE operated as an opportunity structure for political entrepreneurs who were part of the EU’s ‘Multi-level Parliamentary Field’, with EU-level actors putting forward EU-related demands and national actors reclaiming their own role in European politics.

The first path is the European one, whereby primarily MEPs engaged in EU level discussions. The most active Spanish MEP in this sense was Domènec Ruiz Devesa, a member of the PSOE (S&D). Ruiz Devesa operated as a European political entrepreneur, primarily as an agent of the European Parliament, championing the legislative initiative for the EP and transnational lists for the European elections in the CoFoE Plenary. For that purpose, Ruiz Devesa, alongside other Spanish MEPs such as the leader of the S&D, Iratxe García Pérez, worked closely with

other MEPs from different political groups to push the agenda. This type of parliamentary engagement was a typically European one, insofar as it was less oriented to a left–right clash between political groups, and more towards an inter-institutional conflict between the EP and the Council. Furthermore, the involvement of the Spanish MEPs was generally not coordinated with that of Spanish national parliamentarians. The arena in which most of this political engagement took place was the CoFoE Plenary.

The second path is the national one, whereby primarily national and regional parliamentary actors engaged with the CoFoE. This path had its specificities in that it was loosely connected to the European path, and the substance of its discussions differed widely. Whereas the European path was dominated by discussions surrounding the role of the EP and transnational lists, the national path emphasised the role of national parliamentarians in EU policy-making, including regional actors (Kölling, 2023). Some actors operated in between the two lanes. For instance, a group of MEPs that included Catalan pro-independence leader Carles Puigdemont put forward a proposal at the EP level to discuss and introduce the question of self-determination (which is central for the pro-independence Catalan cause) in the CoFoE. However, as this attempt illustrates, this was primarily an exercise in national(ist) politics rather than a genuine transnational issue.

Institutional Level: the Mixed Committee for the European Union

The main parliamentary space in which the CoFoE played out in Spain was the Mixed Committee for the European Union, which belongs both to the Spanish Parliament and the Spanish Senate. The Mixed Committee for the European Union is composed of members from all parliamentary groups represented in the Spanish parliamentary chambers. On 10 May 2021, the day after the CoFoE was formally launched, the Presidents of the Spanish Parliament (the ‘*Congreso*’), Meritxell Batet (PSOE), and the Spanish Senate, Pilar Llop (PSOE), delivered a Joint Declaration on behalf of the two parliamentary chambers in the Mixed Committee. In the declaration, the presidents of both chambers put forward a pro-EU vision, encouraging citizens, civil society, and parliamentarians to participate in the process (they even opened an electronic mailbox for citizens to make suggestions on the Future of Europe). Pilar Llop suggested that the “Union needs to be strengthened and legitimised before its citizens and civil society, which must be the protagonists of its future and must feel the usefulness of belonging to this common ideal” (Congreso, 2021).

Notably, in June 2021 one non-binding resolution was put forward by *Unidas Podemos* to foster Spanish involvement and participation in the CoFoE. However, despite this promising start, the Spanish parliamentary involvement was rather low. For instance, the electronic mailbox only appears to have received five contributions; there were no plenary debates on the CoFoE; there were only three

Table 8.2 Parliamentary activities of the Spanish parliament related to CoFoE.

<i>Plenary debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary questions</i>	<i>Resolutions/ Joint Statements</i>	<i>Committee meetings / debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary information report</i>	<i>Press releases</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Hearings</i>
0	3	2	12	0	0	0	3*

Source: Author's own, based on Senado (2022).

*These hearings happened in the Mixed Committee and are also included in the 12 committee meetings recorded in column 4.

Table 8.3 Mixed Committee Sessions dedicated to the CoFoE.

<i>Session</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Summary</i>
1	26-11-20	Intervention of the Secretary of State for the EU, Juan González-Barba Pera, introducing the idea of the CoFoE
2	06-05-21	Intervention of the Secretary of State for the EU, Juan González-Barba Pera, explaining the governance of the CoFoE and how Spanish parliamentarians can contribute
3	19-05-21	Procedural session
4	03-06-21	Election of the four representatives of the Spanish Parliament and Senate to the CoFoE Plenary
5	15-06-21	Debate with external guests on the CoFoE developments
6	26-10-21	Debate with external guests on the CoFoE developments
7	16-11-21	Debate with external guests on the CoFoE developments
8	15-02-22	Debate with external guests on the CoFoE developments
9	22-03-22	Debate with external guests on the CoFoE developments
10	29-03-22	Debate with external guests on the CoFoE developments
11	28-06-22	Intervention of the four CoFoE Plenary Spanish parliamentarians
12	24-11-22	Approval of the Mixed Committee CoFoE Report

Source: Author's own, based on Senado (2022, 23–24).

parliamentary questions to the government about it; and there is no evidence of press releases or parliamentary information reports dedicated to CoFoE. Thus, most of the action on the CoFoE was developed within the Mixed Committee for the European Union (see Tables 8.2 and 8.3).

In total, 12 sessions were dedicated by the Mixed Committee to discuss the CoFoE (see Table 8.3). Out of the 12 sessions, eight of them were oriented towards the substance of the CoFoE, whereas four of them (sessions 3, 4, 11, and 12) were focused on procedural aspects and accountability of the four Spanish parliamentarians who were Plenary members of the CoFoE.

After the first introductory and procedural sessions to the CoFoE, the Mixed Committee for the EU elected four representatives from the Spanish Parliament and Senate that became part of the CoFoE Plenary (see Table 8.4 and also Spanish

Table 8.4 CoFoE Plenary members from the Spanish *Congreso* and *Senado*.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
Pablo Hispán Iglesias de Ussel	MP	European Democracy	PP	EPP
Héctor Gómez Hernández	MP	(he was replaced by Pere Joan Pons before the start of the Working Groups)	PSOE	S&D
Pere Joan Pons Sampietro	MP	Values and Rights, Rule of Law, Security	PSOE	S&D
Lucía Muñoz Dalda	MP	Stronger Economy, Social Justice, and Jobs	<i>Unidas Podemos</i>	GUE/NGL
Josune Gorospe Elezcano	MP	Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport	EAJ-PNV	Renew

Source: Author's own.

parliamentarians in this chapter). The election of these four representatives, made in the Mixed Committee for the EU, followed an agreement between PSOE (centre-left), *Partido Popular* (centre-right), *Unidas Podemos* (left) and EAJ-PNV (Basque regionalist centre-right). Interestingly, all four parliamentarians belong to the *Congreso* (hence, the Spanish Senate had no representatives in the CoFoE Plenary), only three of the parliamentarians belong to the Mixed Committee for the EU (Pablo Hispán was not a member of the committee), and the third party with most parliamentarians (the extreme right-wing *Vox*), was excluded. This indicates the attempt of pro-EU parties to sideline the extreme right *Vox*, who mobilises an explicitly Eurosceptic discourse and had put forward their parliamentary spokesperson, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros (see Amigo, 2021).

Throughout all the CoFoE sessions organised within the Mixed Committee, the Spanish Secretary of State in the EU, Juan González-Barba Pera, intervened twice as a representative of the government, and there was one hearing–debate organised with the four Spanish parliament plenary representatives. In addition to these three hearings, there were 11 external guests who provided input in the six debates organised within the Mixed Committee, which provides further evidence of the interaction between the Spanish parliamentary field and the CoFoE. The main guests (see Senado, 2022, 23–24) were academics (Susana del Río Villar, Araceli Mangas Martín and Francina Esteve García) and civil society actors (Helena Maleno, founder of Caminando Fronteras; Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, President of the European Movement's Federal Council; and Julia Fernández Arribas, President of *Equipo Europa*). They were accompanied by a diverse group of actors, which included Luis Garicano (MEP from Renew), Marian Elorza (Secretary-General of External Action

of the Basque regional government), José María Areilza Carvajal (Secretary General of the Aspen Institute Spain), Rafael García-Valdecasas Fernández (former magistrate of the Court of Justice of the European Union) and Marta Arpio Santacruz (member of the CoFoE Secretariat).

Overall, the sessions had a mostly informative logic rather than one driven by an accountability perspective – this is rather common when discussing EU-related issues in national parliaments (see Crum and Oleart, 2023). For instance, on 22 March 2022, already in the latest stage of the CoFoE, Marta Arpio Santacruz, a member of the CoFoE Secretariat on behalf of the Council, explained in a parliamentary session of the Mixed Committee that

the first consideration that I want to make is that the joint declaration does not foresee the reform of the treaties as an objective of the conference, and I think that is very clear. The objective of the conference in the joint declaration is to listen to citizens.

(Congreso, 2022a)

In relation to this, in the same session members of the Committee, such as Luis Jesús Uribe-Extebarria Apalategui, Senator and spokesperson on behalf of the *Grupo Parlamentario Vasco*, asked mostly procedural questions about the development of the CoFoE. On the substance of the process, Rubén Moreno Palanques, Senator of the *Partido Popular*, asked Arpio Santacruz whether she was “satisfied with citizen participation, which was ultimately one of the objectives of the Conference [...] Because it gives the impression that there has not been, as many times in the procedures of the European Union, much participation” (Congreso, 2022a). This tends to indicate that the Mixed Committee operated mostly as a space of exchange of information and regular updates about the CoFoE rather than a space of heated political discussions in which different substantive proposals were confronted.

As to the role of regional authorities and regional parliaments in the CoFoE, most Autonomous Communities (ACs) used the CoFoE as an opportunity structure to mobilise pre-existing conflicts within Spain. The regional parliaments and governments that participated did so in most cases to demand a greater role in EU policy-making (on the national and regional participation on the CoFoE, see Abels, 2023). As Kölling (2023) found,

[W]e can identify three groups of ACs. The first one makes serious demands for greater autonomy and the right of self-determination [primarily Catalonia and Basque Country]; the second group mainly demands a stronger role for regions with legislative competences in the EU and a reinforced CoR [Committee of the Regions], while a third group comprises the ACs that are not affiliated to either of the two ‘blocs’.

(144)

The Party–Political Dimension

Generally, there was little party politics in the Spanish parliamentary context on the CoFoE, as the process did not evoke much political controversy from the point of view of domestic politics. In fact, there was almost no politics at all. The Spanish left-wing coalition government, led by the social democrats, mobilised a generally pro-EU perspective, albeit without situating the CoFoE as a relevant political issue in Spanish public debates. This also had important institutional consequences. For instance, an illustration of this is the fact that, unlike Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands, Spain did not organise a national citizens’ panel that could also have had ‘citizen ambassadors’ in the CoFoE Plenary. Furthermore, the body tasked with EU affairs, the Mixed Committee for the EU, is not a particularly political one with divisive arguments, given that often the issues it discusses relate to subsidiarity, and it is more difficult to witness party politics as there is a broad pro-EU consensus. The sign that there was little party politics around the CoFoE is that it did not travel to plenary sessions of the *Congreso* or Senate and was primarily a topic uniquely enclosed within the Committee meetings.

Some elements of contestation emerged on the right side of the political spectrum. Shortly after the CoFoE started, *Vox*, together with other right-wing parties across the EU, signed a Joint Declaration arguing that the “Conference already has the conclusions written. It seeks the forced federalisation of the Union against the true will of European nations and sidelining national parliaments” (Vox, 2021; see Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this book). However, these examples of contestation of the CoFoE did not materialise in vibrant broader debates. The only consequence of this contentious positioning was that, while they were part of the Mixed Committee, *Vox* MPs were excluded from the institutional representation of Spanish parliamentarians in the CoFoE Plenary.

Spanish Parliamentarians in the CoFoE Plenary

The 108 national parliamentarians operating in the CoFoE Plenary comprised the most fragmented component (see also Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book), compared to the other three institutional ‘components’ that were required to formally vote (EP, Commission, and the Council), and also the ‘citizen component’ formed by the 108 ‘citizen ambassadors’ of the European and national citizens’ panels. Each of the four Spanish national parliamentarians in the CoFoE Plenary was involved in a different Working Group (WG) (see Table 8.4), which themselves were composed of members from all the different components constituting the plenary. Ultimately, each of the WGs delivered a concrete set of recommendations to the wider plenary.

The CoFoE also encouraged the self-organisation of events related to the future of Europe in parallel. These events were meant to foster debate on the Conference

and were conceived as ‘public outreach’ rather than as an attempt to meaningfully integrate ideas into the plenary. In Spain, there were six national and 18 regional events organised by public authorities through the cooperation between different levels of government (see Gobierno de España, 2022). As they were not integrated into the plenary, they had no meaningful impact on the work of Spanish parliamentarians in the CoFoE.

In terms of the frames of discussion and interaction in the CoFoE Plenary context, it appears that there was little party politics or a left-right divide. Lucía Muñoz Dalda (*Unidas Podemos*) explained how they were often led by a cleavage between ‘citizens’ and ‘politicians’:

the Conference on the Future of Europe is an exercise for the European Union to gain that legitimacy and that closeness towards the citizenry. This has been very palpable in the debates [in the CoFoE Plenary] as they were perceived on many occasions as a confrontation between citizens and politicians; there was an anti-political frame that was diluted over time and we achieved a very constructive dialogue that was finally reflected in those working documents. The feeling has always been that Europe is under continuous construction, that we were at a crossroads, that we had crucial questions to answer and that it was time to overcome the policies of the European Union that deepened social injustices and inequalities.

(Congreso, 2022b)

Interestingly, according to MPs’ own descriptions, it appears that the Spanish national parliamentary delegation worked quite coherently, and broadly reclaimed a higher degree of involvement. As Pablo Hispán recounted,

during the 2002 Convention [on the Future of Europe], the national parliaments were at the same institutional level as the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council, and in this Conference [on the Future of Europe] no. As my colleagues have said, the work that we have developed has depended on our will, on our capacity for action, but not on the institutional position in which the national parliaments have been placed, which has been a step below the three other institutions. That is why I referred at the beginning to the fact that it would be good, with a view to the future convention, for the national parliaments to recover that position.

(Congreso, 2022b)

This indicates the dissatisfaction of national parliamentarians relating to their own role in the EU in general, and the CoFoE in particular (see also Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this book). As the next section will indicate (see proposal 39 in Table 8.5 below), they successfully mobilised to include recommendations that would strengthen the role of national parliaments in the EU.

Table 8.5 Selected final proposals from the CoFoE.

<i>N.</i>	<i>Proposal</i>	<i>Objective</i>	<i>(Selected) Measures</i>
36	Citizens information, participation and youth	Increase citizens' participation and youth involvement in the democracy at the European Union level to develop a 'full civic experience' for Europeans, ensure that their voice is heard also in between elections, and that the participation is effective . That is why the most appropriate form of participation should be considered for each topic, for example by:	7. Holding Citizens' assemblies periodically, on the basis of legally binding EU law [...]; ¹⁰² Participation and prior involvement of citizens and civil society is an important basis for political decisions to be taken by elected representatives.
38	Democracy and elections	Strengthen European democracy by bolstering its foundations, boosting participation in European Parliament elections, fostering transnational debate on European issues and ensuring a strong link between citizens and their elected representatives, in particular by:	3. Amending EU electoral law to harmonise electoral conditions (voting age, election date, requirements for electoral districts, candidates, political parties and their financing) for the European Parliament elections, as well as moving towards voting for Union-wide lists, or 'transnational lists' [...]
39	EU decision making process	Improve the EU's decision-making process in order to ensure the EU's capability to act, while taking into account the interests of all member states and guaranteeing a transparent and understandable process for the citizens, in particular by:	EU decision-making process should be further developed so that national, regional, local representatives, social partners and organised civil society are more involved . ¹⁴⁷ Inter-parliamentary cooperation and dialogue should be strengthened. National parliaments should also be closer involved in the legislative procedure by the European Parliament

Source: Author's own elaboration with text from the final report of the CoFoE (2022b).

Outcome of the CoFoE

The CoFoE formally ended with a set of 49 proposals endorsed by the Plenary and all components, which are all available in the 'Report on the Final Outcome' of

the CoFoE (CoFoE, 2022a). The recommendations were developed and negotiated within the nine Working Groups, and each of them was constructed upon three dimensions: proposal, objective, and measures. The ‘proposal’ indicates the main subject matter, the objective indicates the goals of the recommendation, and the measures include the specific ways in which those objectives are to be accomplished and how the subject matter is addressed (each recommendation includes multiple measures related to it). A selected set of examples that are specifically addressing questions of democracy (including the role of national parliaments) are included below in Table 8.5.

Interestingly, one of the final CoFoE proposals advocated for further citizens’ assemblies, which was heavily supported by the ‘citizen ambassadors’. Other proposals, such as the ‘transnational lists’ came from MEPs, using the CoFoE arena to push longstanding ideas (see also Chapter 2 by Pittoors and Kotanidis in this book). This is interesting because generally we saw little left–right ideological conflict (both at the EU and national levels), and more of an institutional defence of the respective levels of government: national parliaments, regions, and the EP demanding a greater role. This tends to confirm that different levels of the Spanish parliamentary field treated CoFoE as an opportunity structure, and that those operating at the EU level were more successful than those at the national one.

Thus, in general, there was little horizontal (Spanish national parliamentarians teaming up with other national parliamentarians) or vertical inter-parliamentary (Spanish national parliamentarians teaming up with Spanish MEPs) cooperation related to the CoFoE in the Spanish context. Spanish national parliamentarians barely coordinated with fellow national parliamentarians from other countries beyond reclaiming a greater role for national and regional parliaments in the EU (see Proposal 39 in Table 8.1). Furthermore, there was also little vertical inter-parliamentary cooperation, illustrated by the political action of MEP Ruiz Devesa, who made its political investment on transnational lists in EU elections without engaging in ‘connecting the levels’ by parallel communication at the national level and also with respect to issues related to the role of national parliaments. The small number of references to national parliaments in the final recommendations (3, in proposals 38, 39 and 40; see Table 8.5) are a testimony of the lack of successful horizontal and vertical inter-parliamentary alliances.

Furthermore, while more active than other member states, the centre-left ‘pro-European’ Spanish government rarely put the CoFoE as a relevant political priority, and did not coordinate with parliamentary actors. In terms of parliamentary-executive relations, they went in separate ways, as the Spanish government was focused on the intergovernmental discussions in the Council. There were some efforts, such as when, on 9 June 2022, only one month after the CoFoE official conclusion, the European Parliament adopted a plenary resolution that called on the European Council to kick off an open process to amend the EU treaties, in accordance with Article 48. The EP’s ambitious resolution included the right of legislative initiative for the EP, the abolition of veto powers in the

Council, and the strengthening of the European Pillar of Social Rights, among other things (EP, 2022). However, the same day of the closing CoFoE ceremony, 9 May 2022, a group of 13 member state governments had published a non-paper stating that “Treaty change has never been a purpose of the Conference” (CoFoE, 2022b). Even though a group of six member states, including Spain, responded four days later, on 13 May 2022, with another non-paper stressing that they were “in principle open” to consider treaty change, it appears evident that at the moment a convention was not on the table nor was a priority for any of the actors involved.

Parliamentary–Civil Society Link: Non-inclusion of Spanish Civil Society and Lack of a Public Sphere Perspective

By design, the CoFoE as a whole broadly missed a public sphere perspective (see Oleart, 2023c), as most events related to it were largely insulated from the broader societal debate. In fact, throughout the Conference Plenary sessions there were repeated complaints in the public interventions of civil society and trade union representatives on the basis of their lack of involvement. In a public interview, Alexandrina Najmowicz, the Secretary General of the European Civic Forum and a member of the CoFoE Plenary, argued the following on the role of civil society in the CoFoE:

This lack of recognition has become even more visible and problematic when it comes to the Conference on the Future of Europe, its decision-making process and its functioning. The intergovernmental conference preparing the constitutional treaty in 2000 involved European networks of civil society organizations through a Civil Society Forum, and representatives of the latter were regularly invited to the conference. Twenty years later, the role of intermediary civic organizations has taken a back seat, as the EU plans to engage in a deliberative exercise by addressing European citizens directly and individually. This exercise is necessary, but it must not be limited to institutional populism and public relations, which will ultimately lead to an inevitable increase in mistrust of European and national institutions.

(European Civic Forum, 2022)

This is also applicable to Spain, where only a small number of civil society actors participated, such as *Equipo Europa* or *Real Instituto Elcano*, two usual suspects in EU-related debates in the Spanish context. For instance, *Real Instituto Elcano* was the lead partner of the Spanish government when undertaking the European Citizen Consultations (ECCs), which were conceived as an innovation (in comparison to previous pan-European exercises), providing a space in which citizens could participate in European democracy and the future of European integration. While this represented a novelty, member states were given flexibility in terms of how they were carried out, and in consequence they followed very different procedures

(Stratulat and Butcher, 2018). The lack of common processes and concrete goals made the consultations mainly a symbolic mechanism, and its biggest innovation was to situate on the national agenda the future of Europe debate (Butcher and Pronckutè, 2019). The CoFoE in the Spanish political context largely reproduced the same flaws, as only the usual suspects participated and there was no broader public resonance in the political debate.

Within the usual suspects, we find *Equipo Europa*, chaired during the CoFoE by Julia Fernández Arribas. *Equipo Europa* was one of the earliest entrepreneurs in Spain to mobilise around the Conference. In an interview, Julia Fernández Arribas expanded on her involvement:

We saw a window of opportunity. We foresaw in 2019 that this was going to be a main issue in the European agenda within two years. So, we agreed to work in advance to be able to set the agenda and prepare the European public sphere towards the Conference, whenever it would be finally launched [...] Mostly every European organisation that I know in Spain was talking about the Conference, organising activities about the Conference. [...] But aside from the pro-European civil society, the rest of the civil society was a little bit unaware of the existence of the Conference. [...] The rest weren't that much interested. I don't think they saw an added value on getting involved because they didn't really see their priorities being discussed in the Conference.

(Interview with Julia Fernández Arribas, June 2023)

Equipo Europa was successful in mobilising young people around the Conference, even though in most cases it did so within the network of usual pro-EU suspects, such as *Movimiento Europeo*, *Real Instituto Elcano*, *Talento para el Futuro*, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), *Jóvenes Europeos Federalistas en España* (JEF España), or the Bertelsmann Foundation. Interestingly, Julia Fernández Arribas was invited as a speaker in the Mixed Committee for the EU in March 2022, alongside a speaker from the Council. Rather than ideological confrontation, most of the political interaction had an informative logic:

I was invited by a parliamentarian from the Socialist Party. He wanted to include a young voice in the conversation, and he knew that I was very personally involved. [...] In my session, *it struck me that the four parliamentary representatives to the Conference plenary were not present*. During my intervention, I tried to highlight what the Conference was about, and why it mattered.

(Interview with Julia Fernández Arribas, June 2023)

There was also little follow-up between Spanish parliamentarians and civil society, such as *Equipo Europa*, as neither the four Spanish representatives to the CoFoE Plenary or MEPs coordinated further. This is an indication that Spanish parliamentarians did not pay particular attention to the CoFoE and made little effort

to politicise the process or encourage a European public sphere in a debate on the Future of Europe (see also Haapala and Oleart, 2022). There were some interesting innovations by actors, such as the European Parliamentary Liaison Office (EPLO), as they released some funds to finance events such as an exchange between a group of Spanish and Portuguese young people in Extremadura about the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Overall, while the CoFoE was mostly discussed within the Spanish pro-EU bubble, but according to Fernández Arribas “what makes Spain stand out, as compared to other countries, is that even if we are still a bubble, our bubble is way bigger than in other countries” (Interview with Julia Fernández Arribas, June 2023). An illustration is that, at the October 2021 European Youth Event (EYE) held at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the Spanish delegation was one of the bigger ones, led by *Equipo Europa*, which had over 40 representatives. In fact, I participated in one of *Equipo Europa*’s (2021) events in November 2021 on the CoFoE, alongside speakers from EU institutions, academics, journalists, Spanish parliamentarians, and representatives from other EU member states.

Overall, the CoFoE in the Spanish context managed to mobilise the usual suspects, but the broader civil society and trade unions were mostly absent. In that sense, the European logic followed its own bubble and did not interact much with the national political conflict lines of mass politics. Part of the problem is that the all-encompassing policy scope of the CoFoE actually complicated zooming in on particular dilemmas facing the future of European integration. This resulted in a situation that the actors engaged were those active in the pro-EU bubble and operated in isolation from the wider societal and political debate. However, more broadly, the lack of a connection between the self-organised civil society events and the CoFoE Plenary gave little incentive for a broad range of actors to organise around the Conference.

Conclusion

The chapter has analysed the ways in which Spanish parliamentary actors have contributed to and engaged with the CoFoE; the extent to which politicisation, and party–political divisions emerged; as well as the appearance of Spanish parliamentary ‘political entrepreneurs’. Despite the traditionally pro-EU orientation of the Spanish political spectrum, the domestic parliamentary involvement in the CoFoE was rather limited, even if it did comparatively well in relation to other national parliaments.

The main national parliamentary space where the CoFoE was debated was the Mixed Committee for the EU (composed of members of both the Spanish *Congreso* and Senate), who selected the four representatives for the CoFoE Plenary. Contrary to the Spanish MEPs, who were one of the most active protagonists of pro-integrationist solutions such as transnational lists and *Spitzenkandidaten*, the national delegates to the CoFoE Plenary did not act as domestic entrepreneurs of the proposals developed within the Conference. The Party–political dimension of

the debates carried out in the Mixed Committee was primarily oriented towards the exclusion of extreme right, *Vox*, a party that, on the basis of ‘national sovereignty’, challenges further European integration.

The Spanish parliamentary chambers did not meaningfully engage in inter-parliamentary cooperation, mostly reclaiming a bigger role for national parliaments but with not much coalition-building with other national parliaments. Overall, the Spanish parliamentary interaction with the CoFoE was paradoxical. Engaged and active MEPs did not liaise with their national level counterparts in order to feed and mediate ideas, whereas pro-EU MPs, including the delegates to the plenary, did not liaise with relatively pro-EU Spanish citizens, including the pro-EU youth, around CoFoE-related ideas.

The chapter’s findings are coherent with the overall depoliticised dynamics and philosophy with which the CoFoE was designed. Thus, the level of involvement of the national parliaments may not necessarily be the full responsibility of national parliamentarians, but also of the CoFoE design as a whole, which conceived national parliaments (NPs) as ‘guests’ rather than as ‘hosts’. Indeed, the CoFoE organisers prioritised above any other spaces the European Citizens’ Panels, which in turn were also little politicised and instead organised from a self-perceived (by EU institutions) ‘neutral’ perspective. However, as Curato and Böker (2016) have argued, a systemic conception of deliberative democracy “underscores that mini-publics do not play a constitutive but rather an auxiliary role in deliberative democratisation” (185). The insulation of European citizen panels from the European public spheres reminds us that “the linkages between democracy and deliberation are contingent rather than necessary” (He and Warren, 2011, 270), and thus not all forms of deliberation have a democratising potential, particularly when conceived in such a narrow way.

Thus, a key element to assess normatively ‘democratic innovations’ such as the Conference on the Future of Europe is how they link up with the ‘deliberative system’ (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012), and to what extent they foster contestation in the European public spheres (Oleart 2021). It is precisely this micro-macro link (Olsen and Trenz 2016) that is relevant for EU democracy, and the processes described throughout the chapter do not meaningfully contribute to the democratisation of the EU. National parliaments ought to play a central role in fostering a vibrant public sphere in the EU context, a role the Spanish parliament did not perform during the CoFoE. There are little encouraging signs that this state of affairs might change. Relatedly, Spain assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union during the second half of 2023. It was a crucial time, given that the cycle was closing and the priorities ahead of the 2024 EU elections would be partially set. However, a sign of the weak embeddedness of the CoFoE, both in the public sphere and in the multi-level EU parliamentary field, is that the CoFoE was barely a subject of discussion throughout the Spanish Presidency. This is indicative of the lack of commitment by EU member states on any possible follow-up (see Crum, 2023). The relatively low (but comparatively high) involvement of the Spanish parliamentary field in the CoFoE was unable to make a meaningful difference.

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9 The German *Bundestag* in the Conference on the Future of Europe

Comfortable Guest with Strong Ownership

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Introduction

Due to the specificity of its post-war integration with Europe, Germany has been a country enjoying the longest “permissive consensus” around the European project, with broad cross-party support for the EU understood as increased economic interdependence and shared political sovereignty (Paterson, 2011). In fact, for a long time, it was the only EU member state without an openly EU-hostile political party in parliament. Since the beginning of the Eurozone crisis in the 2010s, EU integration was gradually becoming a less consensual subject among the political parties in the *Bundestag* (Paterson, 2011; Wendler, 2011). The Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) founded in 2013 was the first hard Eurosceptic political party, primarily opposing Germany’s participation in the monetary union but already exhibiting populist rhetoric (Franzmann, 2016). It won its first parliamentary seats in the elections to the European Parliament (EP) in 2014, and, after a party split in 2015, entered the *Bundestag* in 2017 as the third largest party with a clear right-wing populist agenda (Kinski and Poguntke, 2018). Over time, it further radicalised. The AfD campaign programme for the 2019 EP election even called for Germany’s exit from the EU if the party’s fundamental reform initiatives, such as the abolition of the EP, were not realised (AfD, 2019; Anderson for Politico, 2019).

In November 2019, several months after Emmanuel Macron’s letter to European citizens proposing the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) (Macron, 2019), the German government, together with its French counterpart, published a non-paper outlining the two countries’ expectations with regard to this process (EU Law Live, 2019). The non-paper set out a timetable for the Conference and stated that its recommendations should make the EU more united and sovereign in areas like security and defence, migration, climate change, the social market model, the rule of law, and European values. Yet, as argued by Ålander et al. (2021) Germany’s approach to the CoFoE was ambivalent at that time. On the one hand, it co-authored the Franco-German non-paper outlining its expectation of the Conference’s concrete results; on the other, during its Council Presidency in the second half of 2020, Berlin did not treat the Conference as a priority. This lack of

prioritisation can, *inter alia*, be explained by pressing issues such as mitigating the health, economic and social effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The year 2021 was dominated by the electoral campaign for the *Bundestag* in which, besides Covid-19, the devastating flash flood in Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine Westphalia in July dominated public debate (Angenendt, and Kinski, 2022). European affairs were hardly discussed and the CoFoE was not an issue (Abels, 2023).

The parliamentary election in autumn 2021 not only brought the end of the Merkel era and a new governing coalition formed by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*) and the Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP) (Angenendt and Kinski, 2022). It also brought a tangible change to the country's approach to the CoFoE. The cautious position of the former chancellor, Angela Merkel, regarding the possibility of a treaty change as a result of the Conference was substituted with a clear call for serious and ambitious institutional reforms in the pursuit of deeper integration.

Most importantly for the following analysis, the coalition agreement signed in November 2021 by the three parties included a section devoted to the Future of the European Union, which specifically referred to the CoFoE as an opportunity to reform the Union. In the document, we read (SPD, Greens and FDP, 2021, 104, translated by the authors):

We are using the Conference on the Future of Europe for reforms. We support the necessary treaty changes. The conference should result in a constitutional convention and lead to the further development of a federal European state, which is organised in a decentralised manner according to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and is based on the Charter of Fundamental Rights. We want to strengthen the European Parliament (EP), e.g., in its right of initiative, preferably in the Treaties, otherwise inter-institutionally. We will give priority to the Community method again, but where necessary we will go ahead with individual Member States. We support a uniform European electoral law with partly transnational lists and a binding system of leading candidates.

Against this background, the aim of this chapter is to take stock of the German *Bundestag's* involvement in the CoFoE and to assess to what extent it reflected the traditional parliamentary role performed by the chamber on EU affairs, and to what extent it was a new dynamic triggered by the 2021 political change. The research presented here is based on the qualitative analysis of the *Bundestag* plenary sessions related to the CoFoE in 2021 and 2022 as well as publicly available documents on other CoFoE-related activities between 2020 and 2023, such as speeches and parliamentary meetings minutes. The chapter focuses on the *Bundestag*, while the upper chamber – the German *Bundesrat* – and its involvement in the CoFoE, only come in occasionally (see also Abels, 2023).

Institutional and Political Context of the *Bundestag's* Involvement in the CoFoE

The German *Bundestag* is classified in the academic literature as a strong parliament in terms of its institutional oversight and control rights, *vis-à-vis* the national

executive in EU affairs (Auel et al., 2015; Höing, 2015). The constitutional provision laid out in Art. 23 (2) GG provides that the government has to inform both parliamentary chambers comprehensively and as early as possible. The government has to give the *Bundestag* the opportunity to comment prior to its participation in legislative acts of the Union. It takes into account the *Bundestag's* opinion during negotiations (Art. 23 (3) GG).

The *Bundestag* has a political, yet not an imperative, mandate in EU affairs (Kinski, 2012). It is also a chamber in which EU issues are discussed far more often in plenary debates than in other parliaments (Auel et al., 2016; Lehmann, 2023; Rauh, 2015). Finally, the practice indicates that *Bundestag* prioritizes exerting domestic control of and influence on its executive over engaging in external dialogue with the European Commission (Auel et al., 2015; Kinski, 2021). At the same time, the historical experience of federalism has influenced the support of German political elites for EU integration, multi-level governance and sharing of sovereignty across different territorial levels (Hooghe, 1999), at the same time accepting a stronger position of the EP as a supranational source of EU legitimacy (Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sacriste, 2024).

At the time when Emmanuel Macron announced his idea for the Future of Europe Conference in spring 2019, and after almost a decade of crises, “keeping the European Union together” (Euronews, 2021) was the main motto and a priority of the conservative chancellor, Angela Merkel. Germany was widely considered a “status-quo-power [...] not taking any unnecessary risks with EU reforms that could divide the member states” (Kempin and von Ondarza, 2022, translated by the author). Yet, while the previous French initiatives had met with lack of response from Berlin (Macron, 2017), this time was different. Merkel endorsed Macron’s idea of the Conference and co-signed a two-page roadmap for the event to come. This non-paper envisaged that the CoFoE should be a two-phase process, focusing first on institutional reforms, including issues like transnational lists for European elections or the “lead candidate system” (*Spitzenkandidaten*); and, second, be devoted to policy reforms. The document called for a systematic identification of the necessary changes, including their legal, financial, and organisational character, and not ruling out treaty reforms. It was interpreted by some as an attempt to overcome previous tensions in the Franco-German relations and to demonstrate a united stance with regard to EU-oriented policy (Momatz and Herszenhorn for Politico, 2019). The declaration of ownership of the process found its reflection in the program of the German EU Presidency which lasted between July to December 2020. The programme stated:

We can only shape the future of the European Union together with the involvement of all European citizens. The Commission’s idea for a Conference on the Future of Europe is also based on this principle. This conference offers a forum for holding a broad-based discourse on the longer term objectives of the European Union, and also on the lessons that we can learn from the COVID-19 pandemic. We will work to ensure that the Council, Commission and the European Parliament rapidly reach agreement on the structure and mandate of the conference. In so doing, we must clarify how such a conference can take

place under the changed conditions owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will do our part to ensure that the conference is brought to a successful conclusion.

(German Council Presidency, 2020, 14)

The negotiations on the Joint Declaration (JD) were protracted, and the German Presidency could not do much to speed them up. As observed by Dias Pinheiro (in this volume), it took more than a year for the three institutions (EP, Council, and the Commission) to overcome their different perspectives on the shape, functioning, purpose, and outcome of the CoFoE (for more on this see: Greubel 2020). It was only in March 2021 that, under the Portuguese EU Presidency, the Joint Declaration was signed.

After the new ‘traffic-light-coalition’ had taken office, the joint political commitment to the CoFoE in the coalition agreement situated the Conference and its outcome among important items on Germany’s political agenda. The strategic importance and ownership of the Conference were also reflected in the strong German representation in the event (only partially a function of size, 37 Germans took part on behalf of the various CoFoE components, which makes the highest number of delegates from all member states) (European Movement Germany, 2022). Three Germans were also part of the CoFoE Executive Board, of which MEP Manfred Weber (EPP) was a member, while MEP Daniel Freund (Greens/EPA) and MEP Helmut Scholz (GUE/NGL) were observers. Finally, four out of six co-rapporteurs of the AFCO report on the proposals for amendments of the treaties (European Parliament, 2023) were Germans: (Daniel Freund (Greens/EPA), Helmut Scholz, Gabrielle Bischoff (S&D) and Sven Simon (EPP).

Importance of the Role of National Parliaments

Even before the start of the CoFoE, it was clear that ensuring a meaningful role for national parliaments in the process was a priority for the *Bundestag* and German MPs. At the meeting of the COSAC presidential Troika on 13 July 2020 – at the beginning of the German Council Presidency – the chairman of the *Bundestag* Committee on EU Affairs (EAC), Gunther Krichbaum (who will later become the chamber’s delegate to the CoFoE Plenary) stressed that national parliaments wanted to be seen as equal to the European Parliament. He observed that

as Treaty changes could not be excluded, national parliaments needed to be involved at the same level as the European Parliament [and that] possible Treaty changes needed to be communicated by national parliamentarians in their respective constituencies.

(COSAC, 2020a, 3)

At the virtual COSAC plenary meeting at the end of the German Council Presidency in a session devoted to the Future of the European Union, Gunther Krichbaum from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) reiterated that treaty changes should not be excluded from the outset as a possible outcome of the

CoFoE, and that “national parliaments in their important function as linkage between citizens and civil society on the one hand, and the European level on the other hand, expected to be adequately involved in this Conference” (COSAC, 2020b, 12). At the same meeting, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who acted as a keynote speaker at the COSAC meeting, emphasised that the decisive role of Europe’s democracies was why parliaments would also play a key role at the Conference on the Future of Europe, which should start before the end of that year (2024).

The composition of the *Bundestag* delegation to the Conference reflected the chamber’s aim to send two political entrepreneurs. Krichbaum from the CDU and Axel Schäfer from the Social Democrats were elected on 11 June 2021 to represent German MPs in the Conference (Bundestag, 2021a, 30253A). Both are senior politicians who are among the most experienced German national parliamentarians in EU affairs. Krichbaum is one of the most prominent EU politicians of his party and used to Chair the EAC between 2007 and 2021. He also actively participates in inter-parliamentary cooperation, and since 2022 has been his parliamentary party group’s spokesperson on EU affairs (Bundestag, 2024a). Schäfer is Krichbaum’s pendant in the SPD: he was an MEP from 1994 to 1999, has been the SPD’s deputy chairperson responsible for EU affairs and the parliamentary party group’s spokesperson for EU affairs (Schäfer, 2024). He is a longstanding and vocal member of the *Bundestag*’s EAC, and since 2018, he has been a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. After the parliamentary elections, both Krichbaum and Schäfer continued to serve as the *Bundestag*’s delegates to the Conference plenary; the former participated in the Working Group (WG) “EU in the World”, the latter joined the “European Democracy” WG. Table 9.1 shows all

Table 9.1 CoFoE Plenary members from German *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat*.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
<i>Bundestag</i>				
Gunther Krichbaum	EAC Chair (2007–2021)	EU in the World	CDU	EPP
Axel Schäfer	EAC Member, former parliamentary party group’s spokesperson for EU affairs	European Democracy	SPD	S&D
<i>Bundesrat</i>				
Birgit Honé	Minister for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development of the State of Lower Saxony	Climate Change and the Environment	SPD	S&D
Lucia Puttrich	Minister for Federal and European Affairs of the State of Hesse	Digital Transformation	CDU	EPP

Source: Authors’ own. (Bundestag, 2021a; Bundesrat, 2021).

German parliamentary delegates at the Conference Plenary, including those of the *Bundesrat*.

The Party–political Dimension of the CoFoE in the *Bundestag*

Plenary Attention to the CoFoE – Sidelineing the AfD, and Taking Citizens’ Recommendations Seriously

Before, during and after its conclusion, the CoFoE was a recurring topic in parliamentary debates reflecting the prevailing pro-EU consensus among the mainstream parties in the *Bundestag* while at the same time showcasing party–political differences in CoFoE priorities and views on treaty reform (see also Abels, 2023). The far-left party *Die Linke* has always had (soft policy) Eurosceptic traces but given programmatic shifts in recent years, is currently a borderline case at best (Baluch, 2017; Rooduijn, 2023), while others argue that it “can no longer be classified as Eurosceptic” (Treib, 2021, 179). The AfD is a radical-right populist party that champions a nativist Euroscepticism (Baluch, 2017; Rooduijn, 2023). During the debates on the CoFoE, the AfD tried to politicise it, but was marginalised by the other parliamentary parties.

The Conference was the subject of debates in the *Bundestag* three times. The first exchange took place before the parliamentary election on 11 June 2021, and was initiated by the AfD. The CDU/CSU and SPD had requested to extend that day’s parliamentary agenda to include their proposal for the election of Krichbaum and Schäfer as representatives to the Conference plenary without debate (Bundestag, 2021a). AfD member Norbert Kleinwächter raised a point of order, in which he objected to putting the election on the plenary agenda of that day due to lack of prior consultation in the chamber. He also demanded a representative of the opposition to be sent to the Conference. Kleinwächter noticed that

[t]his forum should be a reflection of European diversity. Yes, if it is to be diverse, then we also need a representative of the opposition, especially as the opposition is not sending anyone via the *Bundesrat*. You Greens did not get Mr. Kretschmann through the *Bundesrat*, either.

(Bundestag, 2021a, 30252A)

This highlights difficulties with parliamentary selection mechanisms for Interparliamentary Conferences (IPC) delegations with a limited number of members more generally (Winzen, 2023). At the same time, Kleinwächter added a populist spin by complaining about the German national parliamentary delegation being too small: “One could indeed say that it is problematic that Germany finances 28 percent of the EU budget but only comprises 3.7 percent of the national parliamentary delegations.” (Bundestag, 2021a, 30251B)

This call met with a response from Carsten Schneider, Chief Parliamentary Officer of the SPD parliamentary group, who explained that the *Bundestag*, including the AfD, had agreed to use “a common procedure, a standard practice” to

elect the members of the delegation, . and that the two largest party groups would nominate the representatives. He reminded his colleague that AfD representatives were indeed present at the Conference through the EP, making clear that, in his view, “a party that has set the goal of Germany’s exit from the European Union in its election programme, should not be involved when it comes to deepening within the European Union.”

The second plenary debate took place on 27 January 2022 (Bundestag, 2022a; see also Abels, 2023, 85f). MPs debated the Conference, including the implementation of citizens’ recommendations. The debate was opened by Anna Lührmann (Alliance 90/The Greens), Minister of State for Europe at the Federal Foreign Office, who praised the CoFoE as “the largest experiment of all time for better citizen participation” in which “the EU proves that European democracy does indeed work and is very much alive, demonstrating its commitment to engaging citizens with ever-new ideas. The Conference on the Future of Europe serves as a booster for European democracy.” At the same time, she pointed to two pitfalls of the participatory experiment:

Some speakers were extremely opposed to the proposals of the citizens: ‘This won’t work. We’ve never done it this way before. The EU is good as it is.’ Others tried to co-opt the citizens, either for their own purposes or by simply promising the impossible.

(Bundestag, 2022a, 895D)

Lührmann said that neither of those approaches was the federal government’s answer, and that it would consider citizens’ suggestions seriously. In a similar vein, other mainstream parties, particularly the two CoFoE Plenary delegates, were stressing the need for a proper follow up on citizens’ recommendations and an adequate implementation of the results of the CoFoE. Gunther Krichbaum (CDU) warned that the lack of a serious approach on citizens’ ideas “would be fatal” (Bundestag, 2022a, 897C). Thomas Hacker from the FDP ensured that the governing coalition would make its contribution to the success of the Conference by convincing the European partners that the results of the conference would be discussed honestly and by tackling the necessary reforms quickly.

Referring to inter-parliamentary relations, Axel Schäfer (SPD) stressed the fact that the exchange between parliaments worked quite well in the CoFoE. Mentioning colleagues who used to be MEPs and are now members of the *Bundestag* he said: “It is important to us that we strengthen the rights of the European Parliament and expand its democratic possibilities” (Bundestag, 2022a, 898B). He acknowledged that this was, in fact, a central demand of the citizens at the CoFoE. His statement received applause from his own party group and the coalition partners.

Andrej Hunko from the Left Party criticised the citizens’ recommendation to abolish the unanimity principle in certain policy areas: “I consider it wrong to abolish it in the field of foreign and so-called defence policy; because that would make it even easier, in perspective, to militarily intervene.” (Bundestag, 2022a, 901B).

Norbert Kleinwächter from the AfD used his speaking time for criticising the EU as a political system in general and CoFoE in particular as “so-called participatory democracy” (Bundestag, 2022a, 899D) because, according to him only, “convinced federalists” (ibid.) were allowed to participate. In line with populist parties’ appeal for direct democracy (Weisskircher, 2023), he called on his colleagues: “Have the courage not to deceive the citizens. Have the courage to truly engage in dialogue with the citizens. Have the courage to venture into direct democracy” (Bundestag, 2022a, 900A).

The third debate (Bundestag, 2022b) took place after the conclusion of the Conference on 19 May 2022, initiated by a motion of the AfD entitled “Preserving democracy – distancing from the ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’” (Bundestag, 2022c). Despite the AfD initiating this debate, we saw the party being sidelined by the other party groups in what proved to be quite a politicised debate (see also Abels, 2023, 86). The debate also shed light on MPs’ perceptions of EU democracy and of their representative relationship with citizens.

With the aim of delegitimising the Conference (and the government parties’ role within it), AfD MP, Norbert Kleinwächter, claimed that the objectives of the CoFoE had been agreed in advance and voted on by “not entirely representative participants.” He continued: “This resulted in the participants, who, by the way, were described by Emmanuel Macron as ‘representatives’; but they don’t represent anyone, except perhaps their own opinion” (Bundestag, 2022b, 3642B). He subsequently accused the organisers of the CoFoE of steering the whole process by feeding the citizens with predefined conclusions serving entrenched pro-EU interests. While denouncing the Conference as “a perversion of what direct or representative democracy should be” (Bundestag, 2022b, 3641D), he demanded that the German government reject its conclusions and disclose the funding of the process.

The AfD’s perspective on the process was countered by Axel Schäfer’s response, who described it as a novel and better way of practicing democracy, albeit not without tensions. He noticed: “This process showed that there are tensions between those who were dealing with certain institutional issues for the first time as citizens and those who had already done so as those holding elected office” (Bundestag, 2022b, 3642B). Regarding citizen participation, he expressed his party’s desire for the possibility of a Europe-wide referendum.

As regards the interplay between the European Parliament and the national parliaments Schäfer also noted this:

So far, European democracy has meant the dominance of government and a European Parliament fighting for its rights. We have said: It is necessary that we create a balance between the members of the European Parliament and the members of national parliaments when we talk about the future of Europe.

(Bundestag, 2022b, 3642B)

At the same time, he reiterated his call from the previous plenary session (see above) to extend the competences of the EP:

The first point is that we – and we as members of the national parliaments – want the European Parliament to be strengthened by a right of initiative. It is very important that the European Parliament has equal rights.

(Bundestag, 2022b, 3642C)

This stance, which met with applause from the SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens, FDP, and CDU/CSU MPs, reflects the federalist orientation of the German political elites, who accept a construction of the EU based on shared and pooled sovereignty across different territorial levels and an overall stronger position of the EP as a supranational source of EU legitimacy (see also Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sacriste, 2024).

In response to the AfD's delegitimising claims, Alexander Ulrich (*Die Linke*) made the point that, while the way people were chosen for the panels could be re-thought, the suggestions they made were crucial, especially in the area of social policy.

There are many good proposals, for example, the full implementation of the social pillar, European minimum wages, a uniform and improved health system, better educational opportunities the youth etc. etc., all suggestions that we as the left would sign.

(Bundestag, 2022b, 3646A)

Also, Ann-Veruschka Jurisch (FDP) expressed her opinion that the final report of the Conference reflects people's great desire to make the European Union even more effective, transparent, and closer to its citizens. "The abundance of proposals shows that the EU is not yet perfect" (Bundestag, 2022b, 3647B). She also referred to the AfD in the following way:

Anyone who, on the one hand, wants to abolish the European Parliament because of an alleged democratic deficit, but on the other hand wants to introduce direct democracy in our country, should actually be at least a little heart warmed by this extremely citizen-oriented approach [CoFoE, the author]. Instead, you are spreading conspiracy theories in the most hateful way possible. Your proposal is hypocritical and cynical.

(Bundestag, 2022b, 3647A)

At the same Plenary session, on 19 May 2022 (Bundestag, 2022b), Chancellor Olaf Scholz discussed the CoFoE and the citizens' recommendations in the context of German–French leadership and the *Zeitenwende* in Europe in his government declaration prior the Extraordinary European Council Summit from 30–31 May:

Many of the proposals are very concrete. Citizens, for example, wish for more consistency in climate protection, progress in European defence, a fairer and more inclusive Europe with greater social cohesion. Much of this can be implemented quickly. It does not require lengthy changes to the treaties. Good

proposals from the Commission are sufficient. This also applies to many ideas to make the EU more efficient, such as the majority decisions in the Council that we have demanded. [...]

If necessary, we can discuss a change to the treaties, even a convention. That is not a taboo. However, it's important that we achieve the broadest possible consensus because if there is one thing we do not need at this time, it is a controversial, time-consuming and energy-sapping focus on institutional issues.

(Bundestag, 2022b, 3488D)

Chancellor Scholz focused on those reforms that can be achieved without treaty revisions, and while he is, in principle, open to treaty change, he emphasises the need for consensus on that issue.

All these interventions illustrate that, despite being a “guest” in the process, German mainstream MPs felt considerable political ownership of it as well as some sort of moral duty to treat citizens’ recommendations seriously.

Parliamentary Questions, EAC Meetings on CoFoE, and Press Releases

Apart from plenary debates, German MPs from the opposition used questions as a means to obtain information from the government about the CoFoE (Abels, 2023, 85). This reflected the importance of the Conference on the domestic political agenda and was in line with usual government-opposition dynamics on the use of parliamentary interpellation tools (oral and written questions, small and large interpellations, etc.). Between 2019 and 2022 MPs from SPD, FPD, *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* as well as AfD submitted eight written questions on various aspects of the CoFoE (Bundestag, 2024b; for details, see also Abels, 2023, 85).

The CoFoE was also the item on the agenda of the *Bundestag’s* European Affairs Committee on four different occasions, two times before the beginning of the Conference, once shortly before its closure, and one half a year after its conclusion. On 31 January 2020, the committee met with German MEPs, Gaby Bischoff (SPD), among others, to debate the future of Europe and support the proposal for a Conference on the Future of Europe (Bundestag, 2020). This fact shows that there was some degree of cross-level coordination between the MPs and MEPs on the issue. Moreover, as the report on the EAC’s activity in the 19th legislative term states, during the committee’s meetings in Brussels MPs exchanged views with MEPs about the Conference on the Future of Europe (Bundestag, 2021c), which confirms the interconnectedness of the parliamentary levels in this participatory undertaking. In another non-public meeting on 14 April 2021, the EAC discussed the status of preparations for the Conference (Bundestag, 2021b). The CoFoE was on the EAC agenda for the third time a year later, on 6 April 2022 (Bundestag, 2022d), and participants were informed about the status of discussions at the Conference. At the same meeting, an exchange with the German citizens who were represented at the Conference was also on the

Table 9.2 Parliamentary activities of the German Bundestag related to the CoFoE.

Plenary debates	Parliamentary questions	Resolutions	Committee meetings	Parliamentary information reports	Press releases	Events	Hearings
3	8	0	4	0	6	N/A*	1**

Source: Authors' own based on search at: <https://dip.bundestag.de/>.

*reliable data not available, for some events organised by federal government, see <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/318/1931895.pdf>.

**Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly (FGPA).

agenda. Finally, the EAC discussed a report on the outcome of the Conference on 14 December 2022 (Bundestag, 2022e).

The Bundestag also undertook some dissemination efforts of CoFoE-related information to the German public. Its administration published press releases on the CoFoE, announcing six of the seven CoFoE Plenary sessions, providing information on its representatives to the Conference Plenary, agenda items and the live web stream on the Conference Platform (e.g., Bundestag, 2022f). The press office of the parliamentary administration also published so called “brief news items” (*Kurzmeldungen “Heute im Bundestag”*) on where to find information on the CoFoE (Bundestag, 2021d) and its outcomes (e.g., Bundestag, 2022g).

Political Entrepreneurs – the ‘Usual Suspects’ but also New Advocates

Regarding the extent to which German MPs acted as political entrepreneurs within the CoFoE, the record is somewhat mixed. While the two Bundestag delegates were active during the domestic plenary debates, there is less evidence to suggest their direct involvement in implementing their key proposals, whether at EU level or at the domestic and local level. During the aforementioned plenary debate in January 2022, Gunther Krichbaum, advocated for expanding the format into schools via the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German *Länder*, “so that we ensure a positive impetus, especially among the younger generation” (Bundestag, 2022a, 896D). The socialist, Axel Schäfer was more vocal about the need for EU institutional reforms to create a more federal Union. He repeatedly called for strengthening the position of the EP, emphasising its importance for citizens and fellow MPs alike.

While not formally part of the German CoFoE delegation, Anna Lührmann, Green MP, and Minister of State for Europe and Climate since December 2021, was much more entrepreneurial in the context of the CoFoE, both domestically and externally. Not only did she voice pro-democratic proposals for a more vibrant European public sphere, such as an “EU-TV” as well as EU funding for student exchanges, or proposals for a European minimum wage (Bundestag 2022a, 896B), but also personally participated in various events promoting the CoFoE. For instance, in January 2022, she took part in the closing conference of the online

national citizen panel organised by the German Federal Foreign Office, where 100 randomly selected citizens presented their EU-oriented recommendations (CoFoE, 2022, 23). Moreover, on 21 February 2022, Lührmann was questioned in a meeting of the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly (FGPA), a transnational parliamentary forum which gathers 100 parliamentarians from the German *Bundestag* and the French National Assembly (see also next section; for more on the FGPA, see Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski 2022). She responded to questions posed by the French and German MPs and engaged in a debate on the future of the EU (Bundestag, 2022h). In general, German MPs across the political spectrum (with the exception of the AfD) appeared to feel an obligation to take citizens' recommendations seriously.

Another advocate of the CoFoE who took active stance during various occasions was Tobias Winkler from the CSU and a member of the EAC. During the 27 January 2022 plenary debate (Bundestag, 2022a), Winkler emphasised in his statement that the organisational effort around the CoFoE was not sufficient and that the vast majority of people in Germany, and in many other countries, were not aware of "what a great, forward-looking project of direct citizen participation had been launched". He called on his counterparts to become more engaged:

"If we want to involve more people in it, then we have to play it at all levels."

Winkler also advocated for a more restrained approach to impose one's own solutions on citizens agenda:

In today's discussion, we are seeing that many of the ideas put forward by citizens are already being appropriated into political demands that are being put down on paper or put forward in speeches. I don't think that's the way we should deal with this. We should encourage the citizens. We can of course influence the discussion with our ideas, we can also take part in these conferences in a very concrete way, but we should not then push through our ideas with the justification, so to speak, that the citizens have demanded all this, but we must listen to the citizens and draw our conclusions from them.

(Bundestag, 2022a)

On 25 May 2022, Winkler also took part in a public event organised by the *Bundesjugendring* (DBJR, Federal Youth Council) in cooperation with the Representation of the European Commission in Germany and the Liaison Office of the European Parliament. During the panel discussion with a member of the Federal Youth Council as well as MEPs, Winkler emphasised how important it was to facilitate this EU-wide discussion, which revealed both expected and unexpected demands. He stressed the importance of establishing a procedure to address the results as the implementation phase begins (DBJR, 2022).

Inter-parliamentary Cooperation – Less of a Missed Opportunity

Regarding CoFoE-related inter-parliamentary relations, the EAC of the *Bundestag* maintained particularly close and intensive contacts with its counterpart in the

French National Assembly. Frequent interactions also occurred within the Weimar Triangle format, involving EU committees from Germany, France and Poland, as well as in the newly established Montecitorio format, which was comprised of the European Affairs Committees of Germany, France and Italy.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the CoFoE provided a window of opportunity for the revival of Franco-German leadership in Europe (Abels, 2023). The future of Europe was high on the agenda in the meeting of the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly in Paris on 21 February 2022, chaired by Richard Ferrand, President of the French National Assembly, and Bärbel Bas, President of the *Bundestag*. In addition to the hearing of representatives from the French and German governments responsible for European affairs, Clément Beaune, and Anna Lührmann, a lively Franco-German debate on the future of the European Union occurred for the first time since the German election in 2021. Many German MPs from across the political spectrum took the floor during the meeting, including MPs from *Die Linke*, and AfD.

Directly referring to CoFoE, Gunther Krichbaum gave a warning:

We must be vigilant, for if this conference does not live up to the high expectations it has raised, we will be disappointed. We must, therefore, ensure that the conclusions of this conference are taken into account and passed on. Many voices advocate for the Conference on the Future of Europe to continue beyond May 9. I therefore urge you to take citizens' demands and proposals seriously.

(Bundestag, 2022h, 36)

Krichbaum also emphasised one proposal, namely the increased use of majority voting in foreign policy, as an important reform to implement.

Similarly, Patricia Lips (CDU) highlighted that the EU is once again at a turning point:

I too would have liked to mention the Conference on the Future of Europe, in addition to the many topics that have already been mentioned and which are undoubtedly important. The name of this conference, which appeals to us all, speaks for itself. Its content was not, as is usually the case, determined mainly, if not exclusively, by political parties or bodies, but by citizens, the discussions we had with them, their themes, their debates. This is a genuine citizens' conference, which makes it unique. This original approach naturally raises expectations on the part of the many participants and speakers. Most of them will certainly want us to evaluate their work, but they won't be the only ones. This is why the conference can only be considered a success if it leads to visible and concrete results.

(Bundestag, 2022h, 38)

Within the Weimar Triangle format, on 17 June 2021, just after the launch of the Conference, the two French EACs organised a joint meeting in a format with their

counterparts from the German and Polish parliaments, focusing in particular on how to bring CoFoE to life and achieve the desired results (National Assembly, 2021). Finally, within the Montecitorio format, on 20 May 2021, the European Affairs committees of the *Bundestag*, the National Assembly, and the Italian Chamber of Deputies met by videoconference to discuss the Conference on the Future of Europe, among other topics. The committees asserted that they were determined to play an active role within the CoFoE to ensure that the European Union can address the challenges of the future. This was their joint statement following the meeting:

National parliaments are key players in this reflection as representatives of the citizens of the Union. When the time comes, they will have a central place in the implementation of the directions decided by this Conference. In partnership with civil society, we therefore intend to take joint initiatives to publicize the existence of this Conference and raise the aspirations of citizens. It indeed seems important to us that the debate on the future of Europe takes place as much as possible across borders, based on events launched by institutions from several Member States. This is how European citizens will learn to know each other better and imagine common solutions.

Europa-Union Parliamentary Network

Interestingly, the German parliamentary dimension had a vertical inter-institutional channel of communication whereby MPs and MEPs could liaise and synergise with respect to the CoFoE. These efforts took place through the Parliamentary Network of the Europa-Union Deutschland (PNEUD) – the German section of the Union of European Federalists, a non-partisan and non-governmental organisation advocating for a federal Europe. The aim of PNEUD is to promote a dialogue between citizens and their representatives and, at the same time, to ensure an increased exchange between MPs at the state, federal, and European levels. The Network comprises Europa-Union parliamentary groups from the EP, the German *Bundestag* and state parliaments.

In the 9th European Parliament (2019–2024), 62 out of a total of 96 MEPs from Germany are members of PNEUD. Among them, Gabriele Bischoff, Katarina Barley, Nicola Beer, Daniel Freund, Sven Simon, Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, and Manfred Weber were also members of the CoFoE Plenary, with Weber additionally serving on the CoFoE Executive Board (Europa Union Deutschland, 2024a). At the national level, 182 members of the German *Bundestag* are members of the Network, including Gunther Krichbaum and Axel Schäfer, the two German delegates to the CoFoE (Europa Union Deutschland, 2024b). Finally, at the *Länder* level there are currently PNEUD in the state parliaments of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Lower Saxony, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Hesse (Europa Union Deutschland, 2024c). The PNEUD fed the suggestions and ideas that emerged from its events into the process of the CoFoE (Europa Union Deutschland, 2024d).

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to take stock of the German *Bundestag*'s involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe, assessing the extent to which it reflected the chamber's traditional parliamentary role in EU affairs, and examining any new developments following the 2021 change of government. The empirical analysis confirms the presence of both dynamics.

First, since the CoFoE formed part of the German coalition agreement signed after the *Bundestag* election in September 2021, it is not surprising that the process was closely followed by the parliament and that its results in form of citizens' recommendations were considered by the *Bundestag* as a concrete written outcome that MPs promised to take forward and continue to monitor. The analysis of parliamentary plenary debates, MPs speeches, and other political statements revealed a strong party-political ownership of the EU reform ideas put forward by Conference participants. Specifically, the proposals to abolish national vetoes and shift to qualified majority vote in the Council in more policy areas as well as to strengthen the position of the European Parliament through the right to genuine legislative initiative were vocally supported across the mainstream political spectrum of the SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens, FDP as well as CDU. This reflects the traditional federalist orientation of the German political elites accepting a construction of the EU based on shared and pooled sovereignty across different territorial levels and an overall stronger position of the EP as a supranational source of EU legitimacy. This general pro-integration standing was, however, clearly opposed by the radical right-wing and Eurosceptic AfD.

At the same time, while analysing the performance and activity of individual MPs in the context of the CoFoE, as well as the general institutional involvement of the *Bundestag*, one cannot find much evidence that the chamber was an active "political entrepreneur" at the Conference (for more on the concept of policy entrepreneurs in EU affairs, see Sus 2021, 2023) in the sense of promoting particular policy ideas or institutional reforms proposals, let alone to increase of powers of national parliaments in the EU. The *Bundestag* limited its aspirations to be primarily a "public forum" (Auel et al., 2015) promoting a serious approach to the CoFoE and communicating about the Conference to the public via plenary debates. Despite being one of the strongest national parliaments in EU affairs, the German *Bundestag* seemed to act comfortably as a national advocate and facilitator of the process, leaving the protagonist role of the host to the European Parliament.

The quite active engagement of the *Bundestag* in CoFoE-related inter-parliamentary cooperation was not aimed at lobbying or pushing forward any particular interests or political solutions, but served primarily to communicate the need to take citizens' proposals seriously and emphasise that national parliaments will have a central place in the implementation of citizens' recommendations decided by the Conference. To sum up, contrary to some other parliaments discussed in this volume which revealed ambitions to play a more protagonist role vis á vis the EP – as a "host" of the process (i.e., see the French case in Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka of this book), the German chamber seemed to feel

as comfortable as a “guest” whose main objective was to deliver on citizens’ recommendations following the Conference.

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10 Translating Reluctance into Activism

The Dutch Parliament in the Conference on the Future of Europe

Mendeltje van Keulen

Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was a unique inter-institutional experiment in the context of the European Union (EU). Diplomats, ministers, European Commissioners, national (MPs) and European Members of Parliament (MEPs), citizens and civil society gradually found their way in new forms of meetings, with the aim to exchange views on potential avenues of European integration – so did the government and parliament of the Netherlands.

Amongst many Dutch politicians, the initiative for this brainstorming exercise was met with scepticism. The EU politics of the Netherlands, a founding member of the then-European communities, are grounded in pragmatism and focused on economic, rather than political integration (Van Keulen, 2006; Van der Harst, 2022). In a reaction to Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker presenting his State of the European Union Address in 2017, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte demonstrated his distaste of visionary politics to a group of journalists, quoting Helmut Schmidt: ‘He who has visions should go to the doctor’ (Duursma, 2017). Even Rutte’s friendship and party–political alliance with CoFoE initiator, French President Emmanuel Macron, would not bridge this gap. Yet, representatives from the Dutch government and both Houses of parliament translated an initially reluctant stance into active and assertive involvement during the CoFoE.

How was the bicameral parliament of the Netherlands involved in the CoFoE, and to what extent did it use the Conference as an opportunity structure, to pursue its institutional and political interests? On the basis of formal documentation, including speeches, minutes of meetings and resolutions, press articles and interviews with diplomats and parliamentary staff who were involved in CoFoE, this chapter analyses the involvement of the Dutch House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer*, Second Chamber) and the *Eerste Kamer* (First Chamber, or Senate).

A first introductory section outlines the activity of the Dutch parliament in EU affairs. The reconstruction shows how, after a reluctant start, the Dutch parliament deployed a range of instruments – rapporteurs, delegations, plenary debates, committee hearings, questions, and a citizens’ consultation – to debate, scrutinise and influence the CoFoE. Representatives and staff actively engaged in inter-parliamentary cooperation and a sense of ‘esprit de corps’ developed between Dutch

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government representatives, Members of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament and supporting staff. A shared concern for taking citizens' input seriously led to a remarkably coherent all-Dutch positioning, up until the closure of the Conference in May 2022 and a shared disappointment of the lack of follow-up.

The Netherlands and the EU: A Complicated Relationship

In January 2021, the governing coalition Rutte-III resigned after a parliamentary debate on a scandal involving assumed racial profiling by the government in denying families childcare benefits (Schaart, 2021). Prime Minister Rutte immediately announced his return and in May 2021, just before the start of CoFoE, General Elections took place in which Dutch voters elected a uniquely fragmented House of Representatives. The House consisted of 19 parties, many of them small and inexperienced in national, let alone EU politics.

In the Dutch party–political landscape, three different camps can be characterised. There are two outspoken pro-EU parties, the social-liberal *Democraten 66* (D66) and the Dutch party faction of the pan-European Volt party. On the far-right, Eurosceptic parties, such as the Wilders Party for Freedom, but also the Forum for Democracy, and more Christian conservative parties are hesitant towards deeper Europeanisation. Parties in the centre, the liberals, labour, and Christian democrats, have internal discussions on whether to support concrete sectoral EU policy cooperation, the size of the EU's common budget and future enlargement of the EU (Otjes, 2022).

After a cumbersome cabinet formation, in December 2021, in the middle of CoFoE, a new coalition agreement united the same four coalition parties (the liberal *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD), the social-liberal D66 (both members of Renew), *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) and the conservative *ChristenUnie* (CU) (both members of the EPP) which had formed the previous cabinet, led by the same Prime Minister, Mark Rutte (Otjes and Voerman, 2022).

In the coalition agreement of the Rutte-IV Cabinet, the four parties outlined a preference for concrete deliverables of EU policy (VVD et al., 2021). This was consistent: after the unexpected rejection of the draft EU Constitutional Treaty in June 2005, political elites tried to re-convince public opinion with an instrumental view of European cooperation as inevitable but economically beneficial. In the annual Dutch government letter to parliament on the State of the European Union in 2022 this was called somewhat paradoxically 'a strong EU with strong member states' (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2022).

Mark Rutte is widely known as an agile political deal broker, both nationally and within the European Council. He started his membership of the European Council as a sceptic when it came to political integration in the EU (Harryvan and Van der Harst, 2021). In his first government, then Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans started a project to bring back national competencies from Brussels through a 'subsidiarity exercise' (Van Keulen, 2022). During the 'polycrisis' (Zeitlin et al., 2019) which had to be solved at the EU level, the Dutch Prime Minister purposefully engaged in a two-level game: playing the Eurosceptic at home while, together

with Angela Merkel, actively engaging in further integrative steps at the EU level. A strong proponent of rule of law and frugality, the Dutch government only grudgingly accepted the massive post-Covid Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) in the summer of 2020 (De Vries, 2023).

The previous sections sketched the political context in which the Dutch parliament was confronted with the Conference on the Future of Europe. From the start, it was clear that CoFoE would be a bicameral project. The Dutch parliament consists of the 75-Member Senate or *Eerste Kamer* and the 150-Member House of Representatives or *Tweede Kamer*. Due to separate election procedures and timing, their political composition differs. In national legislative affairs, the Senate is a ‘chambre de réflexion’, coming after the directly elected Second Chamber in amending legislative initiatives. In European legislation and policy-making, both chambers work in parallel. Procedures are regulated in letters with the government and rules of procedure which are not legally or constitutionally formalised, as is the case in, for example, Germany. The lack of a legal basis does not prevent both Dutch chambers from being assessed academically as relatively strong actors in EU scrutiny (Auel et.al., 2015; Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2020; Högenauer, 2015; Kiiver 2009).

Both European Affairs Committees (EAC) coordinate preparations of the European Council, the General Affairs Council and institutional matters: inter-parliamentary delegations, the national scrutiny reserve and subsidiarity control. Around 700 letters regarding EU dossiers from all ministries are annually discussed (Beun and Hargitai, 2021). A particular characteristic of the Dutch parliament is that both chambers debate EU policy openly in livestreamed discussions. There are no closed meetings ‘in camera’, and information shared on the Dutch stance in EU-level negotiations is openly accessible. The government acts under EU coordination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but there is strong departmental autonomy in formulating input for the Council of Ministers. Similarly, the standing committees in both chambers discuss EU policy regarding their respective domains. This ‘decentralised’ system of EU scrutiny has contributed to the mainstreaming of EU affairs with expert staff assisting clerks and Members (Högenauer, 2021).

In contrast to the Spanish national parliament (see Chapter 8 by Oleart in this book), the two chambers of the Dutch parliament do not have a joint standing committee for EU affairs. Both chambers prioritise work on the basis of the annual Commission Work Programme, resulting in a list of EU priorities, which they define separately. Each chamber has appointed an administrator as parliamentary representative in Brussels. These parliamentary liaisons would have a role between diplomats, citizens, the Government Envoy and MEP’s during CoFoE. The First Chamber is more active in inter-parliamentary diplomacy, as the Senators are part-time and have more opportunity to travel abroad. In contrast, close majorities in the House prevent MPs from travelling, as voting can take place on each Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday outside parliamentary recesses. EU dossiers can be easily followed in a digital monitor of the Senate (Homepage EuropaPoort, n.d.). On the CoFoE, a special web page of the Senate lists all parliamentary activities and letters from the government from the beginning to the follow-up of

the Conference, whereas no such overview exists on the web page of the House of Representatives. In practice, day-to-day EU scrutiny takes place in the House, which works full-time and discusses all EU dossiers in committees and in the Plenary. Senate members are invited to join meetings in the House, for example, when European Parliament (EP) rapporteurs attend the House of Representatives' committee meetings.

In sum, CoFoE coincided with a stormy period in Dutch domestic politics, resulting in a fragmented House, which was however experienced in active EU scrutiny. As we will see in the next section, the Dutch government and parliament were initially keeping their distance from the evolving discussions on the future of the EU. However, after CoFoE picked up steam, Dutch parliamentarians became active and outspoken participants.

From a Reluctant Start to Active Involvement in the Future of Europe

CoFoE was considered by Dutch MPs and their staff as 'an accident in slow motion'. This quote, from one interviewee closely involved in the Dutch delegation to CoFoE, is exemplary for the reservations shown in Dutch political circles on the Conference. The previous section has outlined that the Dutch government, including the governing coalition, prefers functional, economic integration over high-level political visions. The lack of a formal treaty base for the different roles of the EU institutions in CoFoE caused unease in the Netherlands, a member state which often stresses the importance of rule of law. For the Dutch government representatives in the Working Groups (WG), it was unclear whether, with interventions in the Plenary, they represented 'the Council' as an institution, or 27 national interests. The 39 chambers of national parliament had a dual role and the Dutch delegation members struggled with group governance – 108 members of national parliaments were guest participants in the Plenary. In the meantime, all parliaments scrutinised a 'national' position expressed by governments in the Council. Lastly, there was a special role designed for EU citizens. As lay persons and guests, they sought to find their role in a politicised environment. In practice, according to the same source, the Dutch citizens' delegation often felt marginalised and crushed between the powerplays of professional politicians and diplomats.

The first time the future of Europe was debated in the presence of Dutch MPs was in the context of an EU inter-parliamentary conference of Chairs of European Affairs Committees (COSAC), during the Austrian Council Presidency in Vienna in July 2018. Parliamentary activism thus preceded a Dutch government stance on the emerging debates at the EU level. The House of Representatives has been an outspoken COSAC participant, for years stressing the potential of these conferences for sharing best practices in parliamentary scrutiny, instead of substantial debates on issues on which political differences between the delegations prevail (Van Keulen 2016). Inter-parliamentary conferences are always carefully

prepared. Once participation from within a standing committee has been defined, the committee staff composes speaking notes and supports the MPs before and during the conferences. This representation is a careful balancing act, as delegations to EU inter-parliamentary meetings are bound to represent a fragmented parliament with 20-plus parties representing very different visions of European integration.

These differing visions also regarded CoFoE, as became clear during a regular debate with the government on the agenda of the General Affairs Council in December 2019 in the House of Representatives. The largest coalition party, the liberals, requested the government to make sure national parliaments would get a prominent role in the Conference. The EU-critical Socialist Party voiced reservations regarding what was called ‘a promotion tour on an ever-closer union’. And the far-right parties, *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) and *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD), expressed their disgust for any exercise on federalist utopias (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2019a).

In February 2020, the Dutch government for the first time formally reacted to the initiative of CoFoE. In a letter to both Houses, the cabinet characterised the Conference as a chance to put forward and defend Dutch interests. Upon the request of the House of Representatives, it promised to require that the Conference meetings would have an inclusive format, with special attention to the role of national parliaments (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2020a). The Dutch position would be focused on ‘achieving results’.

How these results should look was described in the strategic agenda of the Dutch government in 2019 for the new European Commission to take office (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2019). The government had proposed to the EU institutions and member states a number of non-papers with concrete proposals: a common agenda on migration and fighting irregular migration, strengthening and implementing legislation to improve security cooperation (such as anti-terrorism and cyber related threats), a strong and sustainable open economy that offers social protection, an agenda for climate de-carbonisation, and protecting values and interests abroad by an EU trade and investment agenda. In addition to these five priorities, the Netherlands considered that better EU governance, the rule of law, compliance and transparency should also be embedded in the Strategic Agenda.

As to the latter priority, legislative transparency and access to documents had been a leading topic within the Dutch parliament for years. The Dutch delegation of both Houses to COSAC had presented a non-paper in Tallinn in 2017 (Dutch COSAC delegation on EU transparency, 2017). During CoFoE, a Dutch diplomat participated in sessions on legislative transparency and discussions with the Council secretariat, where she successfully pleaded for transparency regarding rules of procedure and reports. Another relevant issue for the Dutch government had been for years the actual implementation of legislation in the member states, the so-called ‘agenda for better regulation’, as well as respect of the rule of law in the member states.

Table 10.1 Parliamentary activities of the Dutch parliament related to CoFoE.

<i>Plenary debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary questions,</i>	<i>Resolutions</i>	<i>Committee meetings/ debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary information report</i>	<i>Press releases</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Hearings¹</i>
5	1 ²	5 (1 <i>Eerste Kamer</i>)	Continuous*	1	1	3	3

Notes: *Information on CoFoE proceedings was tabled at all biweekly procedural meetings of the EAC in both Houses and in each debate with the government preceding any Council for General Affairs.

Source: Author's own.

A noteworthy parliamentary debate preceding CoFoE took place in October 2020, when a resolution was adopted by the House of Representatives, stressing an inclusive format and the appointment of a Chair of the Conference 'who would be able to connect different visions and perceptions on the future of the EU' (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2020b). This wording referred to previous political discussions on the particular role of the Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, who was mentioned as Conference Chair. By euro-critical and far-right parties in the Netherlands, Verhofstadt was considered the embodiment of the federal vision so abhorred by the coalition in The Hague.

Table 10.1 summarises all national parliamentary activities on CoFoE in the Netherlands from 2019–2023, which will now be discussed in more detail.

Parliamentary Debates during CoFoE

On 9 May 2021, CoFoE finally started with a first plenary held in June. During CoFoE, the European Affairs Committees of both Houses had two roles. They delegated spokespersons directly and indirectly, and they scrutinised the Dutch position in the Council. Generally, the House European Affairs Committee convenes with the Minister of Foreign Affairs before every General Affairs Council, and the Senate prepares written questions. In addition to these regular monthly debates, three debates devoted to CoFoE were organised, during which one-quarter to half of the 19 parliamentary factions discussed the Dutch position on CoFoE with the Minister.³ Special parliamentary information arrangements were requested in a joint letter to the government in July 2020 (Oomen-Ruijten, 2020).

By return mail, the Council negotiating mandate as agreed by the General Affairs Council was directly shared, as were the rules of procedure and letters reporting from the plenary meetings and non-papers from member states (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2021a). In the plenary debates preparing the European Council meetings with the Prime Minister, a majority was reached on four resolutions regarding the substance and the process of CoFoE. The most notable resolution, adopted in a debate on 12 June 2021, called upon the government not to exclude a treaty change in advance, provided the interests of the Netherlands are warranted (De Nederlandse Grondwet, 2021).

This line from the coalition agreement was not substantially clarified during the debate. However, it indicates a careful compromise between the pro-EU social-liberal party D66, and the other coalition partners, which were substantially more reluctant over the prospect of opening up the black box of a treaty change exercise at the EU level. In 2005, a parliamentary resolution led to the first-ever nationwide referendum in the Netherlands. In June 2005, the EU Constitutional Treaty was rejected by the majority of the Dutch voters who came to the ballot box. This has been a trauma for Dutch EU policy makers, as the parliament and government had previously adopted the draft treaty, causing a period of soul searching on how the legitimacy of EU policy could have been strengthened (Startin and Krouwel, 2012). This has also contributed to the development, from 2006, of the aforementioned parliamentary EU scrutiny system, in which virtually all EU documents and debates are prepared in both Houses.

Direct Parliamentary Involvement

Apart from the intensive scrutiny of the Dutch government position, both Houses of parliament were also directly involved in CoFoE. Before and during the Conference, three Dutch MPs from the House of Representatives acted as rapporteur and delegates to the Plenary: Roelien Kamminga (Vvd, liberals), Sjoerd Sjoerdsma (D66) and Mustafa Amhaouch (CDA), and two Senators: Ria Oomen-Ruijten (CDA) and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn (Socialist party, member of GUE) (see Table 10.2 below). These five MPs from two chambers thereby represented four of

Table 10.2 CoFoE Plenary members from the *Eerste* and *Tweede Kamer*.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
Mustafa Amhouch	MP House of Representatives	EU in the World, EU Values, Rule of Law	<i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl</i> (CDA)	European People’s Party (EPP)
Roelien Kamminga	MP House of Representatives		<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i> (VVD)	Renew Europe
Sjoerd Sjoerdsma	MP House of Representatives	European Democracy, Health	<i>Democraten 66</i> (D66)	Renew Europe
Ria Oomen-Ruijten	MP Senate		<i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl</i> (CDA)	European People’s Party (EPP)
Bastiaan van Apeldoorn	MP Senate		<i>Socialistische Partij</i> (SP)	The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)

Source: Author’s own.

the 19 political parties, three government coalition parties (VVD, D66, CDA), and one opposition MP. However, they acted on behalf of the whole parliament.

In June 2021, the rapporteurs' mandate was defined by the EAC. They were to monitor proceedings and report back, to increase visibility of CoFoE in the Netherlands and ensure coordination within the parliament. A special request to the rapporteurs was the demand to facilitate, at the EU level, the live streaming of sessions in order to avoid Dutch citizens having to travel to Strasbourg each time to attend CoFoE meetings. The rapporteurs were allocated a budget of 11,000 euro to be spent on travel costs and conference visits (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2021b).

Over 14 months, these Senators and MPs attended inter-parliamentary conferences, held bilateral meetings and briefings at the national parliament and regularly reported back to the European Affairs Committee. The Dutch government Envoy for CoFoE, a role assigned to senior diplomat Wepke Kingma, was also invited by the rapporteurs for a briefing in the House. They shared their input and concerns with him in preparation for the plenaries.

During CoFoE, the House of Representatives' rapporteurs participated in two of the nine Working Groups: "EU in the World" and "Values and Rule of Law". They report to have been successful: through the efforts by MP Roelien Kamminga in the first Working Group, initial recommendations to realise a 'European army' would have been changed into less ambitious and more general texts stressing the need for more EU security cooperation (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022b).

The Senate MPs took part in two different Working Groups: those on European democracy and Health. According to their final report, sent to both Houses in September 2022, the delegation vocally stressed the relevance of adhering to the formal competences of the EU in the fields of health and democratic values (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022b). Again, this should be seen in the context of the general reluctance expressed in the initial stages of the Conference in the Dutch parliament for the exercise not to become a plea for expansion of supra-national competences or 'more Europe'.

The key debate on the CoFoE in the Dutch parliament centered upon a particularly sensitive issue in Dutch politics since the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in a national referendum in June 2005: the need for EU treaty change. Interestingly, in the course of the CoFoE, there was a change of position on this topic. Before the start of the Conference, the Dutch government had been part of a group of member states which together ruled out any legal changes as a result of the CoFoE (Parlement.com, 2021). But in the coalition agreement Rutte-IV, the new cabinet which came to power in the middle of the conference, the pro-EU social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66, a member of the political group Renew) had successfully demanded that this issue of EU treaty change was explicitly mentioned as a possibility. This point was formalised by a majority in the parliament by a resolution in June 2021 in a plenary debate just after the start of CoFoE. The resolution states that the House, considering that a constructive discussion on the future of Europe does not benefit from predetermined outcomes, *'calls on the government not to rule out treaty changes in advance if they promote*

the interests of the Netherlands and the European Union' (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2021c).

On 22 February 2022, MEP and Co-Chair of the CoFoE, Guy Verhofstadt was received in a House EAC meeting. The meeting was attended by seven MPs, and chaired by one of the rapporteurs.⁴ MP Dirk-Jan Eppink, former MEP and representative from the small euro-critical JA21 party echoed the critique by fellow MEP Michiel Hoogeveen on the representativeness of the Citizens' Panels, which would be allegedly formed by Europhile citizens. Caroline van der Plas, Chairwoman of the Farmers Movement – the winner of the Senate elections in 2022 – spoke about European agricultural policy. Pieter Omtzigt – who would become the winner of the general election in November 2023 with his new party NSC – was concerned about the financial-economic strength of the Euro.

Inter-parliamentary Cooperation

At staff level in Brussels, CoFoE was followed by the Standing Group of National Parliamentary Representatives, who hold offices in the European Parliament building. Under the chairmanship of the parliamentary liaison officer of the rotating presidency, they received updates on the state of play, although it was not always clear which information was shared, and when. Information dissemination procedures within the group were not formalised and documents were only distributed at the last moment, making it difficult for the liaisons to brief parliamentary delegations.

CoFoE laid bare political differences between the 39 national chambers and their representatives. More than once, individual or groups of chambers initiated actions, for example by amending a text for the Plenary, without consulting the group – which did not improve trust. In the report concluding the Dutch rapporteurs' assignment, they describe their efforts to keep the discussions away from high political aspirations 'by stressing the importance of pragmatic policy recommendations and downplaying overly ambitious federalist texts' (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022b). For example, as recounted by one interviewee, there was a discussion in the preparatory delegation meetings under the French Presidency, the so-called *components meeting*. Whereas the French Chairs promoted a joint proposal of both the EP and national parliaments, for a right of initiative of the first and a stronger role for the latter, no agreement was found (see also Chapter 5 by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this book). At the same time, the five Dutch rapporteurs also had diverging views: the social-liberal rapporteur, Sjoerdsma, indicated a willingness to sign the proposal, but the others abstained (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022a). Also, parliaments had objections to a number of proposals regarding institutional adjustments from the Working Groups "European Democracy" and "EU in the World". At the insistence of rapporteurs Kamminga and Van Apeldoorn, the content of the proposals was not approved by consensus and not included in the final text. The MPs thus developed into political entrepreneurs in their role as rapporteur, representing the position of their national parliament.

In the course of the year, partly because of the dual role of the national parliament as participant and scrutiniser, closer relations developed between the parliamentary rapporteurs, the special Dutch government envoy, the diplomats from the Dutch Permanent Representation to the EU and the Dutch citizens, who met on different occasions all over the country and in Brussels and Strasbourg. The plenary meetings were prepared together, during dinners in Strasbourg at the Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the Council of Europe – the Dutch diplomatic premises are housed in this town. Procedural coordination was considered necessary as Dutch MPs, MEPs and government representatives were dispersed across the different Working Groups, but they actively shared updates and their impressions.

Involving Dutch citizens

An active role of citizens was one of the outstanding features of CoFoE, and its relevance was repeatedly stressed by both the Dutch government and the parliament. Just before the start of the Conference, in April 2020, the Dutch government devoted a letter to the format of citizens' consultations. Three channels were defined: 1) the government would start national citizens' consultations, 2) civil society and citizens' groups could participate directly in the conference, for example via the European Citizens' Panels, and 3) a website was launched: *Kijk op Europa* (View(s) on Europe) (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2024a). Parliament itself was invited by the government also to actively reach out to citizens.

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) is a scientific institute regularly conducting citizen surveys within the Netherlands. In October 2021, it published an analysis on the basis of previous and updated research of citizens' opinions on the EU as input for the Conference (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2021). Based on a representative survey, the report analysed how Dutch opinions on the EU turn out to be relatively stable – also during the Covid-19 pandemic, which preceded the Conference. A large majority of the Dutch population is supportive of European integration, which is considered indispensable in terms of economic benefits for this small open economy. At the same time, one in five respondents spoke out in favour of a 'Nexit', a Dutch exit from the EU. Thus, the researchers conclude there is a certain ambiguity and ambivalence regarding the EU and its policies. When asked about the future of the EU, one third of the Dutch population expresses the view that EU integration should proceed further, whereas half think the EU goes too far, and one in five Dutch citizens have no opinion on the matter. Whilst one half of the population would have the view that more decisions should be taken at EU level, the other half preferred less EU involvement. However, only one-third supports further enlargement and, in focus groups, concerns are voiced that national autonomy is disregarded and EU membership is too expensive (SCP, 2021).

The government announced a citizens' consultation under the heading 'View on Europe' (*Kijk op Europa*). A consultancy firm organised dialogues with 3,600 Dutch citizens about their views on European cooperation, organised along the

nine Conference themes (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2024b). In October and November, an online survey tested a number of statements on EU cooperation.

The Dutch CoFoE campaign featured a prominent role of the Youth Representatives for EU affairs, appointed by the National Youth Council and members of the European Youth Forum, who were invited to participate in sessions with the rapporteurs and to the plenaries. Although they readily participated, more generally, however, one of the issues became the lack of visibility amongst citizens. A resolution adopted by the Senate majority urged the Dutch government to do more to attract participation to the portal and the consultations. In particular, the Pan-European party Volt – represented in the House – stressed the point that the EU level Panels in the Conference would not be representative of the whole population (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2021d).

The Commission had invited EU citizens to be part of the Conference itself. In practice, dealing with the group of 29 Dutch citizens proved a challenge for the Dutch delegation. For a start, it was not actively shared in the Council working group which fellow nationals had been invited by the European Commission. This demanded initiative from the negotiators, requesting access to the names, which were considered by the Commission as protected by the EU's data privacy regulation. Once this hurdle was passed, the Dutch Permanent Representation established contacts and organised information meetings. The Dutch parliament also acted as a facilitator for the citizens' delegation, by helping them prepare speeches, comfort them during preparatory meetings and supervise them during the plenaries. In the Senate, a session was organised in order to prepare the citizens for the formalities of the conference, such as the 'blue card' by which speaking time was allotted. In practice, the activity of the Dutch citizens would differ: some of them became very outspoken participants, who were regularly interviewed in national newspapers on the occasion of CoFoE Plenary meetings (Schiffers, 2023).

During these meetings, the Dutch parliamentary delegation was very protective of making sure the input of the citizens was taken seriously – even if their substantial contribution was not similar to that of the parliamentary rapporteurs. This led to open clashes with EP representative Manfred Weber during meetings, as there was the impression that the European Parliament delegation was keen to push for their position to the detriment of that of non-professional participants. During the last plenary, the delegation's aim was described by one interviewee involved in the preparations of the Working Groups, as 'damage control', as it seemed that citizens' voices were easily silenced by the dominance of professional politicians. The fear was that this experience for the citizens would lead to frustration amongst the citizens about the EU in general.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the parliamentary rapporteurs were not able to discuss CoFoE live in sessions with Dutch citizens, an element that had been an explicit part of their mandate. In March 2022, the House of Representatives therefore initiated a parliamentary citizens' consultation on its website, receiving more than 9,300 unique responses by Dutch citizens, expressing themselves on various related themes – not all EU related. Many replies were a reaction on the Covid-19 measures, but also NATO and the energy supply were criticised. There were

also expressions of the desire for a ‘Nexit’. The replies turned out to be markedly different from representative surveys amongst the population, like the *Kijk op Europa* survey on CoFoE commissioned by the government (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022a). This result ties into the literature on the lack of representativeness of online participatory formats, which generally exclude offline participants as well as those less interested in the topic at hand (Grewenig, 2023). All in all, it proved difficult for parliamentary staff to integrate the respondents’ viewpoints in the rapporteurs’ positions during the final Plenary.

In the final stages of CoFoE, public discussion in the Netherlands centered on the alleged lack of public visibility (Trommel, 2021). In parliamentary questions, the Euro-critical parties *Juiste Antwoord 2021* (JA21) and *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP) discredited the whole exercise.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this volume is to analyse how national parliaments, from their intermediary role between citizens and executives at both national and EU levels, have responded to the process of the CoFoE, and which factors account for these findings.

The reconstruction of events in this chapter shows how the CoFoE was met with initial scepticism by the Dutch government and the majority of parliamentary factions. This can be explained by a pragmatic focus upon European integration and a distaste for grand political visions. When proceedings developed, however, representatives from both chambers took ownership for the process to the point that it exceeded expectations. Substantially, this change can be explained by domestic politics. In the middle of the Conference, the formation of a new government coalition Rutte-IV paved the way for a change of position regarding the prospect of treaty change. The social-liberal Democrats 66 made the possibility of treaty change resulting from the Conference a political issue, one which should not be ruled out in advance if it promotes the interests of the Netherlands and the European Union. As a result, the three main Dutch parliamentary objectives within the CoFoE became, (1) to closely scrutinise the deliberative process in order to pursue Dutch national interests related to both policy and EU institutional reforms; (2) to enhance the mechanisms of citizen participation and make sure citizens’ proposals are taken seriously; (3) to ensure procedural and substantial transparency of the CoFoE process.

The capacity to achieve these aims was ensured by the structure of EU scrutiny in the Dutch parliament as well as parliamentary resources devoted to EU work – for example, EU advisory staff and an active EU liaison bureau in Brussels. This system has been developed after the 2005 ‘no’ to the EU Constitutional Treaty and has been academically assessed as relatively strong in comparison to other national parliaments. During the Conference, majorities in both Houses decided to make active use of many parliamentary instruments, such as EU rapporteurs and briefings and debates before every Council. Five parliamentary rapporteurs were appointed, two from the Senate and three from the House, who represented the

Dutch parliament in four of the nine Working Group and the Plenary. To a large extent, they acted as facilitators of citizens' contacts and communication with EU and national politicians in order to minimise the risk of citizens' marginalisation as a result of the powerplays of professional politicians and diplomats.

At home, the House of Representatives organised an online citizens' consultation, and meetings with panels of interested Dutch citizens were organised. Another element that fits into the domestic approach of EU scrutiny is the focus on transparency. Debates in the House of Representatives on EU politics are livestreamed, and documents are open to the public. At the EU level, the Dutch parliament has consistently pleaded for transparency of proceedings and documents – for example, CoFoE's rules of procedure. The Dutch rapporteurs were very active in getting these points across during the CoFoE sessions.

Moreover, both staff and rapporteurs engaged in horizontal and vertical inter-parliamentary cooperation, again facilitated by an institutional structure within the parliament that supports active participation in parliamentary conferences and staff meetings. Even if this did not politically 'fit' with their views on the future of Europe, rapporteurs integrated the Dutch citizens into their proceedings and information flows and put their weight into the Working Group and plenaries to have their voices heard. But rapporteur efforts to steer texts away from high political aspirations were not successful, and the delegation expressed criticism both on the final declaration of the Conference as well as on the lack of follow-up. Given the time-consuming efforts by citizens, government, and parliamentary representatives to have CoFoE come to broadly shared and realistic recommendations, the lack of follow-up by the Council and European Council is, still today, considered disappointing.

Notes

- 1 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. (2022a). Conferentie over de Toekomst van Europa (35 508). www.eerstekamer.nl/eu/behandeling/20220907/verslag_van_de_rapporteurs_over_de/document3/f=/vlw5j8rdz3ya.pdf
- 2 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. (2019b). Inbreng verslag schriftelijk overleg over de geannoteerde agenda Raad Algemene Zaken van 10 december 2019 (No. 21501-02–2091). www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2019D49305&did=2019D49305
- 3 On 12 May 2021, the rules of procedure of CoFoE were discussed, as well as non-papers of member states, the Council mandate for the Plenary and a letter from the government on citizens' consultations. Two other House debates were in February 2022 and in March 2022.
- 4 Note that due to Covid-19, some MPs attended from home.

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11 CoFoE as an Opportunity Structure

Activities in the 27 German-speaking Regional Parliaments

Gabriele Abels

[I]t was an absolute novelty of CoFoE that regional politicians could directly participate in a European institutionalised conference process for the first time. Against this background, we also considered CoFoE to be an opportunity to call for the active role of regional parliaments with legislative powers in the European multi-level system. We argue that their role needs to be further strengthened in general and for them to be better integrated into European policy-making and the decision-making processes. (Aras, 2023, 101)

Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was envisioned as a multi-level event, and in the Joint Declaration regions were explicitly invited to participate.

[W]e will organise events in partnership with civil society and stakeholders at European, national, regional and local level, with national and regional Parliaments, the Committee of the Regions [...]. Their involvement will ensure that the Conference [...] reaches every corner of the Union.

(Official Journal C 91/2021 I, 2)

The questions arise: How did regional parliaments engage in CoFoE? Can we explain the differences among them? There are manifold regional parliaments (RPs) in the EU. A subgroup of 72 RPs enjoys legislative power. This group has always attracted scholarly attention (e.g., Abels and Eppler, 2011, 2015; Abels and Högenauer, 2018; Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2017). Of these, my focus is on the 27 German-speaking RPs from Austria, Belgium, Germany and Italy. Several engaged with and participated in CoFoE. I argue that besides domestic factors, such as government–parliament relations or size,¹ Inter-parliamentary Cooperation (IPC) was especially important.

In this chapter, I first introduce the conceptual background, followed by the methodological discussion. The empirical section analyses vertical and horizontal IPC as well the activities in RPs country by country. The discussion of findings is followed by conclusions.

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Conceptual Background

Parliaments have become more active in EU affairs. In response, Auel and Neuhold (2017) have developed the concept of “multi-arena players”. This is useful since it accounts for “the combination of roles that individual [national] parliaments can play within different arenas of EU policy-making” (ibid., 1551). Not only national, but also RPs dedicate different levels of attention and resources to these different arenas. To fit RPs, this concept requires some adaptation (see Table 11.1).

For RPs with legislative powers, the Early Warning System (EWS) arena is most important, since the Lisbon Treaty foresees their active role in subsidiarity control, whenever regional competences are affected. The Political Dialogue arena is used, even if the effect on the Commission seems limited. Yet systematic research is missing.

The relation to governments in the domestic scrutiny arena is crucial. Yet, scrutiny is more complex given the less powerful role also of regional governments in EU affairs. It depends on domestic power-sharing rules, the existence of second chambers, and so forth (see Abels and Eppler, 2015). This also affects the “Passarelle veto” arena in case of a transfer of regional competences to supranational level.

The convention arena is exceptional since it is linked to treaty changes and the potential role of parliaments in a formal convention. Yet, more “informal” “treaty-making” can be important, such as the first-time direct involvement of RPs in a reform process. The final arena is that of Inter-parliamentary Cooperation (IPC). For RPs, this arena is of a vertical – with the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) – as well as a horizontal, domestic as well as transnational nature.

Using all these arenas is difficult for national parliaments (NPs) – and even more so for RPs due to limited institutional capacities and resources. Hence, they must choose in which arena to act, when and how with the aim to defend their powers and potentially expand them. I argue that already in the past RPs have made use of opportunity structures. This was the case in relation to all treaty changes since the 1990s and, hence, in relation to constitution-making. In a formal sense, CoFoE is not of a constitutional nature. In fact, its linkage to a formal convention and treaty changes is contested among and within the EU institutions (see Abels, 2023a). Given the innovative nature of CoFoE as a deliberative process which – for the first time ever – also involves regional actors, CoFoE was perceived by the CoR and by regional politicians as opening a window of opportunity for regional claim-making (see Abels, 2023). Hence, CoFoE was perceived as an opportunity for setting a precedence, for opening a new path for direct regional involvement now and in future conventions.

To support this hypothesis, a second conceptual pillar is helpful. Howarth and Roos (2017) proposed “institutional activism” defined as “a particularly energetic effort on the part of an entity to fulfil an expansively defined understanding of its officially prescribed powers and goals and/or an effort, explicitly or implicitly, to expand these powers and goals” (ibid., 1010). This “institutional activism may result in pushing European integration ahead, to the extent that the increased role

Table 11.1 Multi-arena player concept and its adaptation to regional parliaments.

<i>Arena</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Characteristic and main function</i>	<i>Addressee</i>	<i>Adaptation to RPs</i>
Early warning system (EWS) of subsidiarity control	supranational	Collective right; scrutiny of EU legislation	Commission	Strict limits in regards to competences and timing; often no direct access to Commission, but second chambers involved
Political Dialogue	supranational	Individual, policy-related action, agenda-setting	Commission	Depends on political will of Commission to respond
Domestic scrutiny	national	Individual; scrutiny of own government and its behaviour in Council	National government	Classical parliamentary activities; information by regional government; rights of RP as codified in state and federal constitutions; relation to second chambers
Passerelle veto	national	Individual; scrutiny limited to transfer of competences	National government	No direct involvement, only via second chamber
Convention	supranational	Individual & collective; Participation rights in relation to treaty changes	EU institutions	No direct involvement foreseen – only via second chamber; CoR as mediator for EU level involvement
Inter-parliamentary cooperation (IPC)	Trans- and supranational	Collective; Communication, exchange of views and best practices (e.g., COSAC)	Other NPs plus European Parliament	Limited resources; vertical (with CoR) and horizontal (at domestic and transnational level) networks exist; CoR provides supportive structure

Source: Auel and Neuhold (2017); compiled and adapted by the author.

of supranational entities in a policy area suggests a diminished role and influence for member state governments” (ibid., 1011). It can be formal, but also informal, be successful or fail; the output can be an expansion of formal powers and roles but also informal rules. Also, the reasons for activism can differ from rational and ideational to institutional and an external one. As Schönlau (2017) argues, the CoR is a good example; it has developed a role “beyond mere ‘consultation’” (see also Abels, 2022). Accordingly, actors search for “niches” beyond formal mandates, which provide supportive structures for activism.

Howarth and Roos (2017, 1009) emphasise the combinatorial openness of their concept. As an actor-based concept it can be linked to the role of political entrepreneurs. In other words: activist strategies are not given, but it requires political actors to frame ideas, to convince others and to build coalitions – institutions, however, provide and limit the room for activism. In relation to CoFoE, RPs combined activities in different arenas at domestic and at supranational level.

Research Design and Methodology

This chapter investigates the activities of the 16 German and 9 Austrian RPs plus one each in South Tyrol and Ostbelgien. These 27 German-speaking RPs are a most likely case for institutional activism. First, they are parliaments in federal or federalised systems and enjoy legislative competences. Second, they have developed a high degree of IPC and have been active in EU affairs in the past (Abels, 2013; Abels and Eppler, 2015).

My analysis focuses on activities between 2020 and 2022 and combines an intra-state comparison regarding the parliaments in one member state, but also an inter-state comparison among the four member states involved. Yet, to contextualise CoFoE engagement previous activities and resolutions on EU affairs must be considered. The data was compiled from government and parliamentary websites consisting of press material and public communication. A systematic search for minutes of proceedings, questions, motions, and resolutions in the parliamentary databases was done. Some information is derived from personal conversations with actors involved such as parliamentarians and staff members in the CoR and in select RPs. Further input comes from the RegioParl project team (Meyer, 2023).² The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Empirical Findings

While the study of RPs engagement in CoFoE is in its infancy (see Abels 2023b), activities of the CoR have attracted more attention (Abels et al., 2021; Beckmann and Placzek, 2023; Meyer and Lenhart, 2023; Petzold, 2023). Indeed, the CoR provided a toolbox and advocated regional issues in CoFoE. These activities were beneficial for RP participation; therefore, the discussion of the empirical findings will start with CoR activism followed by a country-by-country analysis. The final step will attend to transnational activities and horizontal IPC.

The CoR – Pushing for a Regional Voice in CoFoE

CoFoE's complex governance structure developed over time influenced by institutional conflict (Fabbrini, 2021). The CoR developed a high degree of institutional activism (Abels et al., 2021) based on the strategy that CoFoE provides a “window of opportunity” to push for direct engagement (for details see Petzold, 2023). First activities date back to 2019. All six CoR Commissions were active, the CIVEX Commission taking the lead. It has hosted numerous hearings and meetings and commissioned two studies. CoFoE “was on the agenda of almost all CoR plenary sessions between 2020 and 2022, during which no less than 4 resolutions and 15 opinions related to it were adopted” (Petzold, 2023, 41). The aim was to play a role in the set-up and conduct of CoFoE, and to lobby for recognition of long-standing regional claims. The resolution on “The place of regions in the European Union architecture in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe” as of 29 June 2021 was paramount. The CoR, joined by several partners,³ outlined its expectations of what should be done and its calls for the founding of an “Alliance of Regions for European Democracy”. A key claim is that

we see the Conference as an opportunity to develop a discussion on the place of regions in the European Union's democratic architecture and to strengthen trust among European citizens. Our long-term political objective is to enhance the regions' political impact at the European level on matters with direct relevance to the work of local and regional authorities.

(CoR, 2021)

In the eyes of an insider, the future conference “has been an unexpected but also limited success” for the CoR (Petzold, 2023, 51) – unexpected regarding the direct participation of regional actors in the conference, yet limited considering the CoFoE outcome (policy proposals).

In terms of participation, a total of 30 regional delegates became full members of the Conference Plenary and participated in the thematic Working Group. This group consists of 18 CoR delegates plus 12 delegates from regional and local levels. While the former were CoR members and recruited along party lines, the latter were nominated by territorial associations (such as CEMR and EuroCities) and other regional and local stakeholders. Five of the 30 regional delegates (i.e., 16.6%) came from the German-speaking regions (see Table 11.2). All of them held high-ranking positions in regional parliaments (as presidents) or government which made them ideal delegates. These members became political entrepreneurs for linking ideas and actors across the supranational and the regional levels. Furthermore, CoR President Apostolos Tzitzikostas (Governor of a region in Greece) held observer status in the Executive Board, that is, the supreme CoFoE governing body.

In relation to policy claims, the CoR's key goal was to strengthen the role of regions in European governance. To push for these claims and to support regions and their delegates, the CoR used an established strategy of capacity-building: it

Table 11.2 CoFoE Plenary members from German-speaking regions.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Nominated by</i>	<i>Conference Plenary Working Group</i>	<i>National party</i>	<i>European political group</i>
Mark Speich	North Rhine-Westphalia (GER)	Secretary of State	CoR	EU in the world	<i>Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU)</i>	EPP
Ilse Aigner	Bavaria (GER)	President of State Parliament	CoR – on behalf of German regional parliaments	values and rights, rule of law, security	<i>Christlich Soziale Union (CSU)</i>	EPP
Muhterem Aras	Baden-Württemberg (GER)	President of State Parliament	CoR	climate change and environment	<i>Bündnis90 / Die Grünen</i>	Greens
Verena Dunst	Burgenland (A)	President of State Parliament	CALRE	EU in the world	SPÖ	S&D
Karl-Heinz Lambertz	Ostbelgien (B)	President of the Parliament of the Community	Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)	values and rights, rule of law, security	<i>Sozialistische Partei (SP)</i>	S&D

Source: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/conference-future-of-europe.aspx> accessed: 2 Aug. 2023; Author's own depiction.

(GER) = Germany; (A) = Austria; (B) = Belgium

hosted “outreach events,” commissioned surveys, and set up a High-Level Group on European Democracy,⁴ and developed a toolbox.

This strategy showed limited success when reading the final CoFoE report with a regional lens. A total of about “45 [out of 325 measures] appear to be of particular relevance for cities, regions, and the CoR” (Petzold, 2023, 45). While several proposals are on institutional reforms, others are related to policies which are important for regions. Process analysis illustrates that those proposals originate from discussions in the CoFoE Plenary – hence, they can be linked to the direct involvement of CoR delegates and the CoR President in the thematic Working Groups (see *ibid.*, 46). This includes key issues on European democracy such as measures regarding subsidiarity, role of regional parliaments and the reform of the CoR. Petzold (2023, 46) argues that “the most relevant proposals and measures made in qualitative terms and relevance for regions and cities were developed on the topic of ‘European democracy’”. Especially proposal no. 40 is vital for regions, calling for the right to initiate supranational legislation even for RPs (Beckmann and Placzek, 2023, 283). For Petzold (2023, 51), there is no doubt that “this has been the result of effective lobbying including within and across political party families”.

Activities of 27 RPs from Four Member States

The CoR strategy of capacity-building was beneficial for RP participation. This section will analyse activities in more detail (for an overview see Table 11.3).

Germany

Germany was one of the more active countries – at national and regional level (Abels, 2023b; see also Chapter 9 by Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sus in this book). At the *Länder* level, about 50 events were officially organised (for details see Abels 2023b, 89): First, *differences in the level and kind of activity* between the *Länder* exist. Only few remained inactive and just ran, for instance, a CoFoE campaign (e.g., Hamburg, Saxony-Anhalt). Others were highly active. Clearly, an *executive bias* exists; most public activities (e.g., Citizens’ Dialogues) were organised by governments, only a few of them jointly with parliaments. In most RPs, plenaries and sectoral (EU affairs) committees occasionally discussed CoFoE – especially before the conference started or in the early days, as well as towards the end. Several RPs adopted resolutions. Some more active states were also, in general, more active in EU affairs. However, there is no clear pattern regarding the general level of activity in EU affairs and on CoFoE.

Second, the parliamentary debates prove a clear *party pattern*: The right-wing populist and partly extremist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) was the only party that opposed CoFoE on principled reasons – questioning the legitimacy of CoFoE and the deliberative process (see Abels, 2023b, 91).

Third, especially border regions often organised *transnational events*, that is, with Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France and Poland. Already existing

Euroregions, Interreg projects, and other formats of regional (or even municipal, i.e. twin cities) cooperation were often used to organise such events.

Fourth, some *Länder* focused on *novel event formats and target groups*. Digital formats were used frequently (due to the Covid-19 pandemic and given geographical distance), especially for transborder events. Several states conducted virtual deliberations only (e.g., North Rhine-Westphalia). Also, many dialogues were particularly directed at young people. Sometimes this involved more creative formats such as poetry slams and comic events (Schleswig-Holstein), or direct exchange between citizens and MEPs during a Ferris wheel ride labelled the “Europa*Rad” (Bavaria). Finally, results of dialogue events were uploaded to the official CoFoE Multilingual Digital Platform.

The Bavarian *Landtag* (205 MPs) was very active in CoFoE. The President of the state parliament, Ilse Aigner, was an important entrepreneur. Aigner was the official representative of all German RPs and a member of the CoR delegation. Being a member of the *Christlich Soziale Union* (CSU) (the party in government since 1957), Aigner met and discussed CoFoE with Manfred Weber, President of the conservative EPP group in the European Parliament, plus the Bavarian State Minister for EU affairs, Melanie Huml.

CoFoE was occasionally on the parliamentary agenda. In the past, the EAC has set up several hearings on how to strengthen the role of RPs in EU affairs. Early on, the *Landtag* welcomed the decision on the CoFoE governance structure and the direct participation of RPs. Based on a motion by the conservative *Freie Wähler*, the CSU’s coalition partner in government, the EAC adopted a resolution in September 2021. The *Landtag* salutes the CoR initiatives and recent declaration on regions in European governances; it demands that future conferences should be used for “courageous reforms steps” (Bayerischer Landtag, 2021). All political parties adopted the motion – except for the AfD. This pattern shows up in further debates.

When CoFoE came to an end, the Bavarian *Landtag* discussed a resolution of the two parties in government. The resolution of 30 March 2022 again expressed its general support for CoFoE; it demanded that the process should be continued, and participation of citizens should be institutionalised (Bayerischer Landtag, 2022a). All parties adopted it – except for the AfD.

A motion for a resolution was initiated in May 2022 in relation to the European Commission’s 2023 work programme (Bayerischer Landtag, 2022b). Initiated by the two parties in government the motion welcomes CoFoE due to its participatory approach and demands that the process should be extended to allow in-depth discussion or even prepare for the process of an official European Convention (see *ibid.*, 2). It also calls for stronger “active subsidiarity” securing regional competences and regions’ participation in the subsidiarity control system as well as inclusion of regional parliaments in a “green card” system for initiating EU legislation (see *ibid.*). It supports the initiative launched by the CoR and CALRE. The objective is that RPs should play a stronger role in the pre-legislative phase. Input from RP debates should – via the political dialogue – have a stronger impact on the European Commission’s annual work programme (see *ibid.*, 1).

As for events, the *Landtag* organised a transnational local dialogue between Munich and Bordeaux plus a trinational dialogue involving several regions in Austria and Czechia.

Baden-Württemberg is another excellent example: It had been a trailblazer regarding (a) regional involvement in EU affairs for two decades and (b) citizens' engagement and deliberative instruments (see Peters and Ziegenbalg, 2023). CoFoE allowed to combine and build on experiences in both fields. The government organised about 10 Citizens' Dialogues, including three transborder events – one of them a six-region dialogue. It also funded local dialogues with municipalities and used the existing Danube strategy for organising a “youth event”. In addition, the *Landtag* (154 MPs) organised one event directed to young people. The activities are anchored in established alliances and existing cooperations (*ibid.*).

High-ranking political entrepreneurs were important, including the Prime Minister, Winfried Kretschmann, himself. As an observer for the rotating COSAC presidency Kretschmann attended several CoFoE Executive Board meetings. CoR member and State Secretary Florian Hassler organised debriefings and participated in public and parliamentary debates. The third entrepreneur was Muhterem Aras – CoR delegate to CoFoE's Conference Plenary and President of the *Landtag* (see Table 11.1). She gave a speech already in the opening session of the Conference Plenary and actively participated in its Working Group on climate change. In a personal account she calls CoFoE a very “rewarding experience”. The three politicians (all from the ‘Euro-friendly’ Green party) acted as entrepreneurs linking the EU and the regional levels.

President Aras and the Green party in government triggered many RP activities. The *Landtag* discussed CoFoE several times. For instance, on 21 November 2021 its European Affairs Committee (EAC)

discussed CoFoE in a public hearing with experts. The results of this hearing, to which I [Aras] also contributed my experiences from the CoFoE Process, were the foundation for the resolution of the *Landtag* as of 2 February 2022.

(Aras, 2023, 100)

The resolution was a cross-partisan initiative (except for the AfD). The demands made are typical for regional voices. The *Landtag* declares

13. that the regions and regional parliaments, as legislators and mediators of European policy, have a central role in the multi-level system of the EU and that they must exercise and further expand their scope for action in the sense of the principle of subsidiarity, and that in particular border regions should be strengthened as laboratories of European integration;

14. that the State Parliament of Baden-Württemberg will continue to actively support the further development of the European Union and play its role as a co-shaper, mediator and platform for European integration.

(Landtag von Baden-Württemberg 2022; translated with deepl.com software)

Jointly with CoR President Tzitzikostas, Aras issued a strong statement at the final CoFoE event on 9 May 2022. Both presidents advocated a Union “closer to the citizens”, for a stronger role of regions and municipalities as a means to increase trust in the EU and for better rule-making. They welcomed the proposal of the European Parliament to initiate a Treaty Convention. They argue that this initiative should “provide the impetus for this fundamentally changed role of local and regional authorities and the European Committee of the Regions to take concrete shape” (Tzitzikostas and Aras, 2022).

The *Landtag* monitored the follow-up process. For instance, CoFoE was on the agenda on 12 May 2022 in connection to the government’s regular EU affairs’ report. It appeared again in March 2023 in relation to the Russian war against Ukraine. The EAC adopted a cross-partisan (except for the AfD) resolution “Conference on the Future of Europe – strengthening Europe’s capacity to act in the face of the changing times”. It called on the government to monitor and enforce CoFoE follow-up, including the establishment of further Citizens’ Dialogues by the European Commission, and to continue reporting to parliament. CoFoE results should be further discussed especially in relation to the upcoming European elections in 2024.

Austria

In Austria, the governments organised a total of 24 national and regional activities between May 2021 and May 2022 (Zukunftskonferenz.at). Besides a website, the government published a brochure documenting activities (Bundeskanzleramt, 2022). Many formats were rather classical (i.e., debates among experts and/or politicians), others were more citizen-centred.

Already before the official CoFoE start, the national government organised dialogues (Österreich-Dialoge) in all nine *Länder* (see *ibid.*, 36f.) in summer 2020. In addition, many “Future Labs”, “Euro-Cafés”, “Demokratiewerkstatt” (democracy workshop), “EU future hiking tours” and surveys were organised. The position of “district councillors for EU affairs” (*EU Gemeinderät*innen*) was promoted (*ibid.*, 65ff.); this was a regular format. Often events were co-organised with Europe Direct liaison offices, with civil society organisations or academic associations, or with the permanent “Citizen Forum Europe” (*BürgerInnen Forum Europa*). Many were linked to other events (e.g., international women’s day, “Vienna Design Week”) and often they were addressed to the younger population. For example, the parliaments of Burgenland and Salzburg organised “future talks” on the parliaments’ premises.

As well, the *Bundesrat*, the second chamber, became engaged. It organised a joint event with the EACs of the nine RPs (Meyer et al., 2023, 128). Five of the nine RPs are small in size (36 MPs). Some bigger and smaller RPs were more active than others. The CoR did support and contribute to several events, for instance in Burgenland, Carinthia, or Salzburg. The RP in Salzburg (36 MPs), for example, organised a transnational future talk with young people.

In Austria, enlargement and neighbourhood policy were prominent topics. Some events directly involved Western Balkan countries such as a high-level discussion with the federal Minister for EU affairs and politicians from the Western Balkans as part of the “Salzburg Europe Summit”. Young people from six Western Balkan countries participated in both (national) Austrian-French future dialogues (Bundeskanzleramt, 2022, 98ff.).

The Landtag Burgenland (36 MPs) was fairly active due to the role of parliamentary and civil society entrepreneurs such as the Foster Europe “Foundation for strong European Regions”. Events were co-organised by the RP and civil society organisations. A key actor was RP President Verena Dunst (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ). Nominated by CALRE, President Dunst was a member of CoFoE’s Conference Plenary. The parliament organised a youth event in March 2022 and Dunst announced she would take the results back to the final CoFoE Plenary meeting.

Regarding RPs’ plenary debates and resolutions, there were no, or only few, activities. Only Styria (48 MPs) and Tyrol (36 MPs) adopted resolutions – in both cases initiated by the liberal NEOS. They call for regional Citizens’ Dialogues (jointly organised with the regional government) with the intention to “bring CoFoE closer to the region” and the citizens. While in Tyrol adoption was consensual, the Styrian RP approved the resolution against the votes of the radical parties on the left (*Kommunistische Partei Österreichs*, KPÖ) and the right (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ).

Meyer et al. (2023) identify party politicisation along GAL (green, alternative liberals) versus TAN (traditionalist, authoritarian nationalists) lines. The FPÖ’s position resembles the populist response of the AfD in Germany: they oppose CoFoE as centralist, Brussels-based window-dressing. Interestingly, the conservative *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP) developed a more Eurosceptic stance. As for regional competences, Meyer et al. conclude that federalism

did not cause any major conflicts on the Conference between representatives from the different territorial levels in Austria. The *Länder* (including governmental and parliamentary actors) mostly called for a stronger involvement of regions, including regional parliaments, in EU decision-making but also supported the government line towards the Western Balkan states and other issues.

(Meyer et al., 2023, 130)

South Tyrol⁵

South Tyrol is the one and only predominately German-speaking region in Italy (for an historical account, see Pallaver, 2014). The status as a ‘minority nation’ justifies its unique status as “autonomous province”. Asymmetric regionalisation has created incentives to play a stronger role in EU affairs – in terms of implementing *and* shaping policies; yet opportunities for direct involvement are restricted by national law. Strong cross-border cooperation has become

a valuable tool (see Zwilling, 2022). Moreover, there is an openness towards democratic innovations and participatory democracy linked to regional development (Trettel, 2021).

In Italy, national events were organised to raise awareness for CoFoE (see Cafaro, 2023, 156). Three aspects are noteworthy: First, special committees developed a strategy; second, many events addressed the younger generation and creative tools and formats to approach them (especially via social media). Third, there was a dedicated budget for national *and* regional events.

The official portal on regional politics for young people informed about CoFoE (Südtiroler Landtag, 2021) and an informal *Stammtisch* format (regulars' table) was set up. On the final day of CoFoE, an event directed to the younger generation "University and Schools 4 EU" was organised in Bolzano. An alliance of catholic civil society groups (FAFCE) discussed CoFoE and adopted a list of demands in relation to families. The *Europaregion Euregio*, of which South Tyrol is part (plus Tyrol and Trentino), organised an online dialogue with citizens and politicians in November 2021.

In sum, activities were limited. The small South Tyrol *Landtag* (35 MPs) did not initiate particular initiatives nor adopt resolutions. Yet, the dominant South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP) – and especially Herbert Dorfmann, the member of the European Parliament from the region – promoted CoFoE and constantly demanded to recognise regional interests (e.g., subsidiarity) in CoFoE.

Ostbelgien

Officially, the German-speaking Community of Belgium, Ostbelgien is the youngest of the regions discussed here (for its history see Zentrum für Ostbelgische Geschichte, n.d.). The region benefitted from centrifugal Belgian federalism which is characterised by "imperfect congruence between regional and community borders" (Swenden, 2002, 74). Despite its small size "the German-speaking community [...] has almost the same set of community competencies as the much larger French or Flemish community" (ibid.).

Belgium has "a relatively long tradition" regarding deliberative tools (Sautter and Reuchamps, 2023, 69). The pioneering "Ostbelgien Modell" (Sautter and Reuchamps, 2023, 70f.) for the world's first "Permanent Citizen Dialogue" (see Niessen and Reuchamps, 2022) was developed, inspired by experiences in other regions.

Yet, the position to CoFoE was ambivalent. While a total of about 26 events took place in Belgium, illustrating that CoFoE "was met with open arms" (ibid., 67), there was only one event in Ostbelgien. After the CoR called on regions to become active and provided some resources (e.g., for translation) plus a toolbox, the Ostbelgien parliament (25 MPs) set up a transborder Citizens' Dialogues on the topic "Europe concrete – living in a border region" (*Europa konkret – Leben in der Grenzregion*) in November 2021. Together with the regional Europe Direct Centre and the German Ministry for EU Affairs from Brandenburg, the RP organised a dialogue for young people which involved, besides a gymnasium from Eupen,

also schools from the German-Polish region of Guben/Gubin (Parliament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens, 2022b, 57). The RP neither discussed CoFoE nor adopted an official resolution (personal conversation, July 2023).

The RP was, however, involved in the transnational parliamentary discussion on CoFoE – via an important political entrepreneur: Karl-Heinz Lambertz. In addition to his regional mandate as First Minister of Ostbelgien since 1999 and then President of the Ostbelgien Parliament from 2014 to 2016 and again from 2019 to 2023 (interrupted by his time as Belgium Senator), Lambertz was member of the CoR since 2001, and from 2017–2020 he acted as CoR President. In this position, he was a staunch supporter of CoFoE and strong regional involvement. As acting CoR President, he intervened in the discussion among the EU institutions and managed to achieve a strong representation of the CoR and of regional and local authorities in the CoFoE governance structure (see Petzold, 2023, 40; personal conversation, June 2022). No longer CoR President when CoFoE officially started, Lambertz was a member of the CoR delegation to the Conference Plenary; he participated in the thematic Working Groups on subsidiarity, which is *the* key issue for regions in relation to EU affairs.

In sum, the RP was not very active: it did not pass a resolution, but it co-organised an event. Towards the end of CoFoE the general affairs committee discussed a report (Parliament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens, 2022a). Concurrently, former PM and now MP, Lambertz, was an entrepreneur at transnational as well as at supranational EU debate on CoFoE – especially via the CoR.

Horizontal Inter-parliamentary Cooperation

Domestic and transnational IPC were important. The relevant forum was the *Landtags präsidentenkonferenz* (conference of RP presidents; in short: LPK). Established after World War II (for details see Abels, 2013), the intention was to foster parliamentary democracy from below. Separate conferences took place in Germany and Austria. Over time, transnational networking started. The South Tyrol RP became a member of the Austrian national LPK in 2017, while the RP of Ostbelgien joined the transnational conferences as an observer. Supported also via their membership in CALRE, these 27 RPs began to meet regularly as a transnational LPK to exchange views and best practices, to lobby for regional claims and empower each other.

Since the 1970s, European affairs have become prominent in this arena; all major EU reforms since the early 1990s were discussed. In fact, numerous decisions, declarations, and resolutions address the role of RPs in EU affairs and call for improvement (Abels, 2013, 357–59). Since the 2000s, and in the context of the EU's Constitutional Convention, these resolutions became more insistent, calling for stronger respect of federalism and the principle of subsidiarity. With Austria's EU accession in 1995, EU affairs became important for the Austrian LPK.

A decade ago, the LPK started to meet, often in Brussels, in a special format as “*Europakonferenz*” (E-LPK) focussing on EU affairs. Against this background, it is no surprise that CoFoE was on its agenda. The E-LPK started to work on a position

Table 11.3 Parliamentary activities of selected regional parliaments related to CoFoE.

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Plenary debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary questions</i>	<i>Resolutions (declarations)</i>	<i>Committee meetings/ committee debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary information report</i>	<i>Press releases</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Hearings</i>	<i>Special parliamentary bodies / positions</i>
CoR	several	n.a.	4 resolutions + 15 opinions	In all 6 CoR Commission, especially CIVEX	2 studies commissioned	several	Opening event 7 May 2021, plus more than 140 co-organised outreach events	several	High-Level Group on European Democracy
Bavaria	Yes, several	--	5	EAC	--	3	2	yes	President as CoFoE delegate
Baden-Wuerttemberg	Yes, several	--	2	EAC	--	4	1	yes	President as CoFoE delegate
Burgenland	--	--	--	--	--	1	1	--	President as CoFoE delegate
South Tyrol	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--
Ostbelgien	--	--	--	1	--	--	1	--	President as CoFoE delegate

Source: Author's own.

towards CoFoE at its meeting in 2020. It adopted declarations on 1 February 2021 and on 24 January 2022. According to Aras, who participated in all meetings in her function as RP President, the E-LPK “welcomed the future process and supported the further development of the European Union” (Aras, 2023, 101). The 5th E-LPK, jointly organised, in an online format, by Bremen and Lower Austria in 2022, adopted a declaration in which the presidents welcomed that CoFoE was opened to direct participation by state parliaments (LPK 22 2022, para 2); they emphasised the role of state parliaments as mediators and their commitment to CoFoE activities (para 7). They called for a stronger role of RPs with legislative power in EU politics, for changes in the subsidiarity control system (para 8), and for an extension of CoFoE to allow for more in-depth discussion (para 9). They also highlighted that any CoFoE follow-up – including potential changes in competencies and legislation – must respect the principle of subsidiarity and the rights of RPs (para 10). They demanded the introduction of a “green card” to initiate legislation to complement the scrutiny system of subsidiarity checks (para 11). Finally, the declaration emphasises the accession perspective for the Western Balkans countries and the participation of their parliaments in CoFoE (para 12).

Declarations are non-binding and the E-LPK’s (rotating) presidency lacks administrative resources. In this sense, it is a weak institution. Nevertheless, exchanging information and best practices was important and fostered mutual learning in EU affairs. Joining forces helped to empower the parliaments, especially the small ones. The policy claims raised in relation to CoFoE were neither surprising nor fresh, but had been issued many times before (see Abels, 2013; see also LPK 15 2015). Yet, claims were updated and adapted to political developments at EU level and in relation to national parliaments, that is, the call for stronger involvement in the EWS, a regional “green card”, or for participation of candidate countries. Consequently, E-LPK declarations were among the most reported on CoFoE-related events on the RPs websites; they were often discussed in RPs and supportive resolutions were adopted.

Discussion of Findings

At this time, classical parliamentary activities (resolutions, debates, etc.) were at a low level in the 27 German-speaking RPs. In contrast, IPC was strong and CoFoE was an important topic. All RPs participated in the E-LPK summits. They supported the two resolutions endorsing CoFoE and calling for a stronger role of regions in European governance. Via direct participation of regional entrepreneurs – especially in the CoFoE Plenary – some regional interests “found their way into the final report [...] to a degree that not many would have guessed before” (Petzold, 2023, 51).

How to interpret these findings? First, *size* might matter. The small number of MPs affects the degree of specialisation of MPs, the committee system, as well as administration and resources (i.e., parliamentary research service). Overall, the bigger German RPs were more active, and they had direct representation in the CoFoE Plenary.

Yet, size does not automatically correlate with level of domestic activity. In some bigger RPs, activity was modest, for example, Lower Saxony (146 MPs), or null such as in Berlin (159 MPs). Burgenland is as small as South Tyrol (both 36 MPs). Yet, the former was more active. Also, size can be balanced by cooperation. Based on the logic of parliamentary rule and given limited resources, many RPs cooperated on events with ‘their’ governments. It was especially useful for more resource-intensive transnational events. Moreover, cooperation with civil society associations, think tanks, and so forth took place.

Only a few resolutions were adopted. In committee and plenary debates familiar patterns of politicisation prevail: Eurosceptic parties – like the German AfD or Austrian FPÖ – opposed CoFoE. Overall, there was broad cross-partisan pro-CoFoE consensus. This situation does not correspond with a pattern of politicisation known as GAL (green, alternative, libertarianism) versus TAN (traditionalism, authoritarianism, nationalism). For example, also the conservative and “subsidiarity-friendly” Bavarian CSU welcomed CoFoE, and its *Landtag* President, Ilse Aigner, was a strong entrepreneur.

RPs with a higher level of activity were those with a direct – and high-ranking – representative in CoFoE and its Conference Plenary. This pertains to Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, and Burgenland – all of which had *Landtag* presidents who participated directly in CoFoE, but not so in Ostbelgien. Yet, the Ostbelgien RP is the smallest and its former PM was a political entrepreneur at EU level, respectively, in the CoR.

As for vertical cooperation, the toolbox developed and the resources provided by the CoR were beneficial for organisation of events and discussion at regional level. What is more, CoR activism was crucial: Without intense lobbying there would have been no direct participation of regional delegates. In so doing, CoFoE potentially set a precedent for future reform debates.

Horizontal cooperation, domestically and transnationally, was important. Activities built on the LPK, respectively, E-LPK which existed as forum for exchanging regional perspectives and for lobbying in EU affairs across party lines. The claims raised were then taken up at the supranational level via vertical cooperation and made it into the final CoFoE Report. Finally, regional activism did not end with CoFoE. RP follow-up monitoring activities, such as resolutions, are part of the domestic scrutiny arena. Furthermore, the CoR (joined by CALRE) started an initiative according to which the input from RPs debates should be submitted to the European Commission, already in the pre-legislative stage as part of the political dialogue arena.

Conclusion

Activities of RPs usually concentrate on domestic scrutiny and the EWS as the arena for ‘normal’ policy-making. Yet, CoFoE was perceived as an opportunity structure. The IPC arena was paramount, in its horizontal as well as vertical dimension and especially in its transnational format (E-LPK). Domestic activities took place, but by and large with a low degree of intensity.

The concept of “multi-arena players” allows for distinguishing between different arenas and for investigating if, why and on which arenas parliaments concentrate their activities, depending on the issues at stake. Given size and limited resources, such strategic concentration is essential. CoFoE was interpreted as worth developing a high level of “institutional activism”, above all in the IPC arena. Using this arena was easy because relevant fora (LPK resp. E-LPK) for horizontal IPC already existed. Also, vertical relations to the CoR were pre-existing. In sum, this IPC arena was key for somewhat successful lobbying efforts in relation to RPs role in EU affairs. The CoR was a key actor employing “institutional activism”. It lobbied for direct regional participation and recognition of regional interests, such as subsidiarity and a stronger regional voice. Hence, this concept proved useful, and I suggest its further usage, given the dynamic nature of the EU polity. What the long-term effects will be on the role of regions remains to be seen. The discussion on the lessons learned and CoFoE’s implications for future EU treaty changes is still ongoing.

Notes

- 1 The 27 RPs strongly differ in size, that is, in number of members. In Germany, the range is from 205 MPs in Bavaria to 51 in Saarland. In Austria, Vienna has the largest number (100) of MPs, while Vorarlberg is smallest (36 MPs). The remaining two are very small with 35 MPs in South Tyrol and only 25 in Ostbelgien.
- 2 The RegioParl project “ran from 2018 to 2022 and focused on the role of regional actors in the EU multi-level system from a comparative perspective” (www.regioparl.com).
- 3 This includes 11 of the 27 RPs that were part of this study. Additionally, territorial organisations such as CALRE, which is an association of RP with legislative competences set up in 1997, but also the Conference of Italian Regions and Autonomous Provinces was partner to the declaration.
- 4 This group was chaired by Herman van Rompuy, former President of the European Council and former Prime Minister of Belgium.
- 5 I am grateful to Elisabeth Alber from the Institute for Comparative Federalism in Bolzano to provide information.

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Conclusion

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Lucy Kinski

Introduction

This book set out to unravel and assess synergies and legitimacy clashes that emerge when parliamentary representation meets citizen participation in EU multi-level democracy by analysing the parliamentary dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Throughout the eleven chapters, our contributors have provided case studies of the European Parliament's (EP), national parliaments' (NPs) and regional parliaments' (RPs) activities in the context of the CoFoE to answer the following research questions from a comparative perspective:

- (1) In what ways did the different parliamentary chambers become involved in the CoFoE process, including through delegations, plenary debates, committee hearings, parliamentary questions, or special events?
- (2) How have political parties engaged with the process and the outcome of the CoFoE?
- (3) Have there been any “political entrepreneurs” among the members of the RPs, NPs, and the EP, who were especially (pro-)active in the context of CoFoE, and why?
- (4) To what extent did parliamentary actors engage in horizontal and vertical inter-parliamentary cooperation related to the CoFoE, and what political alliances, if any, have been formed to respond to citizens' recommendations?
- (5) Which factors shape similarities and differences in parliamentary involvement in the CoFoE?

While addressing these questions, we conceptualised the process of the CoFoE as well as its ongoing follow-up as an opportunity structure for parliamentary actors to fulfil their policy-making, representation, linkage, and legitimation functions, as well as other institutional and political ambitions related to their roles in EU affairs. We understood parliaments as potential intermediaries between citizens and executive institutions at both the national and EU levels. In an actor-centred approach, we put a special focus on political parties and individual parliamentarians as political entrepreneurs who may use the opportunities provided by CoFoE by bringing in ideas, mobilising resources, and influencing outcomes. While the EP was defined as the “host” of CoFoE's parliamentary dimension, with a more powerful position

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from the onset of the Conference, national (and regional) parliaments were the “guests” in that process.

Based on the empirical evidence gathered in this volume, a general finding is that, regardless of their actual scope of involvement in the process, parliamentary actors had quite high expectations regarding their participation in the CoFoE, which goes to show the political significance of the event for parliaments. We find that the Conference was perceived as an opportunity structure at all three levels of analysis – the institutional, the party–political, and the individual MP level, even though it was used to a varying extent. Regarding the institutional level, for the majority of parliaments we studied, CoFoE did indeed provide an opportunity not only to fulfil a variety of their functions, including a direct engagement with citizens, but also to further strengthen their roles in the EU political system. While we see differences across the chambers under study with regard to how extensively they have used the opportunities thus provided to them (for more details, see below), we have not found outright dismissal of the process by any of the analysed parliaments.

Our findings on the party–political dimension show that while the CoFoE was mainly used by the pro-EU side of the political spectrum (centre-right, centre, centre left) to pursue reforms aimed at deepening EU integration (except in the Dutch parliament), the more Eurosceptic parties – at least in the EP – used the CoFoE to promote a more “Eurorealist” and sovereigntist vision of the EU (see Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this book). There were more individual entrepreneurs at the EP level as compared to the national level, which is consistent with the “hosting” role of the EP. Our findings also confirm that the EP was perceived as a dominant actor in the process, which reflected the asymmetry described in the conceptual Chapter 1 by Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski. Despite quite intense efforts at inter-parliamentary cooperation and coordination, they did not bring about the outcomes expected by the EP and some of the national parliaments (see more detail in section below). Overall, as this conclusion highlights, some synergies materialised among national parliaments, as well as between the EP and some of them, yet, substantial legitimacy clashes prevailed.

This concluding chapter is structured as follows: Departing from our analytical framework laid out in Chapter 1, we synthesise the main empirical findings from the individual chapters, highlighting similarities and differences as well as more general patterns in the parliamentary dimension of CoFoE. We first discuss the “host” and the “guest” perspectives separately, focusing on the extent and types of parliamentary involvement in, and activities related to the CoFoE, as well as the overall evaluation of the process and its follow-up. Second, we turn to the assessment of inter-parliamentary cooperation during the process of CoFoE before we conclude with some reflections on the implications of our findings for linking participatory and representative democracy in the EU, and avenues for future research.

The European Parliament – an Ambitious, Yet Ambiguous “Host”

As a new EU platform of transnational deliberative democracy, the CoFoE provided an excellent opportunity for the EP to exert influence on the EU reform agenda. As

shown in great detail by Pittoors and Kotanidis (Chapter 2), the CoFoE served as a tool for the European Parliament as an institutional actor to enhance its role as *the* key representative of European citizens. In this regard, Pittoors and Kotanidis show that the EP has skilfully performed the function of “the host” of the process to use all potential advantages that this position offered. The EP was highly influential in defining the set-up of the Conference, particularly regarding the method of citizens’ involvement. It also successfully performed the role of foremost intermediary between European citizens and EU executive actors. It has done so by actively and publicly supporting the CoFoE early on and throughout the process and, consequently, pressuring the Council *ex-post* to launch a Convention in order to implement citizens’ recommendations. The CoFoE also provided the EP with a platform to advance its own ambitions for more political and institutional power. As observed by Kotýnek Krotký (Chapter 3), Dias Pinheiro (Chapter 4) and Kaniok (Chapter 7) in this volume, the European Parliament had a very concrete agenda for what it wanted to achieve as an outcome of the Conference. The EP invested considerable political and institutional effort in advocating for initiatives such as the *Spitzenkandidaten*, transnational party lists, and a fully fledged legislative initiative to further bolster its capacity to influence EU policy-making.

In sum, as observed by Pittoors and Kotanidis (Chapter 2) while the EP’s explicit support for the CoFoE can be seen as a continuation of its historical role as entrepreneur of EU democratic reform, it can equally be viewed as an attempt to ensure control over this transnational participatory process and to strengthen its institutional and political position in the EU.

Unified on the Outside, Divided on the Inside

As much as the EP’s institutional position, represented and articulated by its delegation to the CoFoE, was unified on the outside, this unity crumbles upon closer scrutiny. Through disaggregating the EP’s institutional position from the perspective of its constituent parts – European political groups – Kotýnek Krotký (Chapter 3) shows that the Conference process was subject to continuous contestation by Right-wing Eurosceptic political groups and, to some extent, also by the Left. His analysis revealed that the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) had initially welcomed the launch of the CoFoE as an opportunity for EU institutions to consult Europeans on their views on EU policies and the reform of the Union, yet the ECR ultimately decided to withdraw from the Conference, rejecting the idea that its conclusions represented ‘the will of the citizens’. More generally, right-wing Eurosceptics saw the Conference as an opportunity to promote their “Eurorealist” vision of a confederal Europe, emphasising the crucial role of national parliaments as custodians of national sovereignty. However, they were swiftly sidelined, and sidelined themselves, from the process.

It is challenging to determine how far this exclusion resulted from the *cordon sanitaire* (Ripoll Servent, 2019) imposed by mainstream political groups, and to what extent Eurosceptics essentially boycotted the process. While it likely is a bit of both, Kotýnek Krotký (Chapter 3) points to the substance of the far-right Eurosceptic criticism of CoFoE. He emphasises that some of the negative

evaluations of the Conference by ECR and Identity and Democracy (ID) – such as lack of transparency and appropriate public attention and media coverage, or the potential bias in selecting the citizen representatives – resonate with broader criticism related to the process expressed across the political spectrum as well as by experts and observers.

An Unaccommodating “Host”?

While Chapter 2 shows that the EP has skilfully performed the function of “the host” of the CoFoE by using all potential advantages that this position offered, the EP failed to accommodate the “guests” in the process by making the Conference feel “like home” to them. In fact, the EP – understood as an institutional actor represented by its delegation to the CoFoE – missed several opportunities to bolster the much-needed trust, and feeling of ownership, on the side of its national counterparts. Crucially, the EP missed this opportunity even before the start of the process when it expressed hesitancy regarding the role of national parliaments in CoFoE. As recalled by Dias Pinheiro in this volume (Chapter 4), at the meeting of the EP Constitutional Affairs Committee, the Chair of the EP delegation, MEP Guy Verhofstadt (Renew), called for a cautious approach that would prevent national parliaments from “taking over the CoFoE, as it was (...) the case with the European Convention” (European Parliament, 2019) and simply blocking the exercise. As shown by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka (Chapter 5) in this volume, the danger of derailing the Conference indeed lurked from within the national parliamentary component, but maybe this danger could have been minimised if there had been more genuine cooperation from the start of the process. Initially, the “host” could have extended a more welcoming invitation to its “guests”.

Another missed opportunity to fully accommodate the “guests” into its flagship project occurred when the organisers did not invite national parliamentarians to the Citizens Panels as silent observers. The Panels rightly aimed to provide randomly selected citizens with an unmediated space for deliberating and discussing EU policies and institutional design. However, completely isolating them from the political sphere has led to a backlash. As pointed out elsewhere by *Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sacriste* (2021), the reason for that could be looked for in the disconnection of the Citizens Panels from the national parliamentary dimension. As much as the Panels constituted an impressive exercise in transnational participatory democracy at European level, there was always a risk that their overall outcome could be diminished or even discredited by Eurosceptic parties at both the EU and national levels. The organisation of the Panels, including the random selection of citizens,¹ was entrusted to the CoFoE Executive Board and the Common Secretariat, where the EP and the Commission played leading roles. However, national parliaments were not included as constituent parts in this process. More importantly, the CoFoE organisers had agreed to grant observers’ access to the Citizens Panels to EU experts and academics, but they did not provide a similar possibility, let alone issued an invitation, to national parliamentarians to perform the same roles.

Their presence as observers in the most strategic part of the CoFoE, could have minimised the risk of *ex-post* delegitimisation of the Conference process and citizens' recommendations by far-right Eurosceptics in the EP and NPs. Indeed, some MPs, like Kacper Płażyński, the Chair of the Polish *Sejm's* EAC (Law and Justice, PiS), raised this issue during one of the inter-parliamentary meetings, stating: "And in the case of citizens panels, I wonder why national MPs cannot be observers during the panels in order to make sure that all procedures are met" (European Parliament, 2021). This setup was not only easily exploited by far-right Eurosceptics but it also led to more general concerns over lack of transparency or deliberative biases favouring certain proposals and eliminating less popular or controversial ideas during the Panels. Notwithstanding the shortcomings on the part of national parliaments, what these examples indicate is that national MPs may have at times felt like "unwanted guests", feared for potentially spoiling the party.

Entrepreneurs on Both Sides of the Political Spectrum

While the EP acted within the CoFoE as an institutional entrepreneur of EU democratic reform, some individual MEPs were also especially active in the CoFoE and invested their time and resources to promote their ideas on policy and institutional reform. Interestingly, however, this entrepreneurship was visible on both sides of the EP political spectrum, the pro-EU and the Eurosceptic one. In the pro-EU camp, the most prominent entrepreneur was undoubtedly the Chair of the EP delegation to the CoFoE, Guy Verhofstadt (Renew). Verhofstadt's entrepreneurship was reflected not only in charismatic speeches about the value of citizens' deliberations and the need for treaty reform, but also in building coalitions around the ideas important for the EP. In this sense, as shown by Dias Pinheiro (Chapter 4), Verhofstadt – although initially wary of the inclusion of national parliaments in the Conference – quickly noticed the opportunity that a united parliamentary front would offer, and how it could potentially serve to advance some crucial institutional reform proposals. As reported by both Dias Pinheiro (Chapter 4) and Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka (Chapter 5), Verhofstadt took the lead in not only forging alliances with the French Presidency to sign a Joint Declaration (JD) between national parliaments and the EP, but also reached out to the Troika of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) to set up Working Groups (WGs) as an additional reinforcement of a common inter-parliamentary stance.

Besides Verhofstadt, there were other highly active MEPs on the integrationist side of the political spectrum, who vocally promoted the CoFoE as a process, as well as put forward reform ideas in the form of reports, speeches, and meetings with citizens. One of them was Domènec Ruiz Devesa, a Spanish MEP representing the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) who, according to Oleart (Chapter 8 in this volume), "primarily as an agent of the European Parliament, championing the legislative initiative for the EP and transnational lists for the European elections" (p. 159). To this end, Devesa authored and co-authored several reports, opinions, and motions for resolutions related to CoFoE and EU reforms,

as well as worked closely with other MEPs from different political groups to push the agenda forward. The Greens also had their CoFoE entrepreneur, Daniel Freund, who was a regular speaker at the Conference Plenaries, especially active in promoting the ideas of abolishing the national vetoes, introducing transnational lists and the need for treaty changes, both within the EP, as well as on social media. Together with Verhofstadt, he was one of the co-rapporteurs of the ambitious and comprehensive Report on Proposals for the Amendment of the treaties tabled by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) and voted on by the EP plenary in November 2023 (European Parliament, 2023).

The far-right Eurosceptics also had their actively engaged agents. Two of them were the Polish MEPs from the Law and Justice party belonging to the ECR group, Ryszard Legutko and Zdzisław Krasnodębski. As reported by Kotýnek Krotký (Chapter 3), Legutko, one of the Vice-Presidents of the EP, was very vocal in discrediting the leading role played by the EP and stressing the importance of inclusion of the national parliaments into the process. As ECR's main rapporteur on all the motions for resolutions the group presented during CoFoE, Krasnodębski acted as the 'mastermind' behind all written communication. In line with the assumptions presented in the conceptual chapter on political entrepreneurs, the ECR's resolutions not only delegitimised activities and proposals of the EP's delegation, but also proposed alternative solutions to those promoted by the pro-EU camp. For example, the ECR insisted that Citizens' Panels should be organised primarily at national level and that thematic transnational civic conferences should summarise the debates held at national level. Moreover, they also postulated that the three co-chairs of the Conference should include two national parliamentarians nominated by the European Council and one MEP nominated by the European Parliament. Even though these resolutions were never adopted due to insufficient political support, their substance clearly illustrates legitimacy clashes in the envisaged design of the CoFoE proposed by the two camps.

Based on the findings presented by our contributors, regarding both the EP's actual activities and the perception of these actions by other parliamentary actors, the European Parliament, represented by its CoFoE delegation, had a specific and focused agenda for what it aimed to accomplish as an outcome of the Conference. While much of that agenda genuinely enhances EU parliamentary democracy, and the EP has become more accommodating during the process, it still missed several opportunities to be a more attentive partner, especially towards its national counterparts. As in their everyday legislative work, mainstream party groups were "delineating a line between tolerable and intolerable Eurosceptics" (Ripoll Servent, and Panning, 2019, 757), while the latter had no interest in constructive cooperation during CoFoE, but rather aimed at exploiting it for their own ends.

The National and Regional Parliaments – Eclectic Guests in the CoFoE

Unlike in the case of the EP, it is not an easy task to synthesize key findings from the rich empirical analyses conducted on the different national and regional

parliaments and their involvement in CoFoE. All surveyed parliaments, national and regional, those with more ambition regarding the outcome of the Conference and those who were indifferent or even outright sceptical, engaged in the process and the follow-up, albeit to quite a varying extent, with different aims, and in multiple forms. To understand the ways in which the parliaments used CoFoE as an opportunity structure, we now turn to a comparative analysis of the extent and types of activities they engaged in with relation to the Conference. This analysis includes a discussion of the potential factors that shape the patterns we observed. We then move on to a comparative assessment of the party–political dimension of national and regional parliaments in the CoFoE before we compare the roles that political entrepreneurs played in the analysed parliaments. We conclude with how the different parliaments engaged in the follow-up of the process.

Different Opportunity Structures for Different Parliaments

While two chapter authors conclude that there was limited national parliamentary involvement in the CoFoE (*Grinc* for the Czech parliament in Chapter 6, and *Oleart* for the Spanish parliament in Chapter 8), others see an increase in involvement over time (*Van Keulen* for the Dutch parliament in Chapter 10), or particular activism in a certain period (*Dias Pinheiro* for the Portuguese parliament during the country’s Council Presidency in Chapter 4). Yet other parliaments had an active approach to CoFoE throughout (*Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka* for the French parliament in Chapter 5, *Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sus* for the German parliament in Chapter 9, and *Kaniok* for the Swedish parliament in Chapter 7).

Quite a few national parliaments exhibited strong ownership of the process, at least through their delegates at the Conference. Some used it to push the Conference and its EU reform agenda (the French, the Portuguese and, to some extent, the German parliament). Others, such as the Swedish and Dutch parliaments, had a more defensive approach towards CoFoE and its EU reform agenda. A similar pattern can be observed for the different regional parliaments under study as their CoFoE–related activity levels vary (see Chapter 11 *by Abels*).

While the sheer number of activities only tells us so much, and we cannot easily define a yardstick of what is considered a lot of involvement and activity related to CoFoE, we can provide a systematic comparison of a variety of CoFoE–related activities across the national parliaments under analysis in this book (see Table 12.1).²

Keeping in mind that different parliamentary activities and tools tend to serve multiple functions (*Auel, Rozenberg, and Tacea, 2015; Auel, Eisele, Kinski, 2016*), we have asked the chapter authors to collect data on all CoFoE–related plenary debates (main topic/among main topics), parliamentary questions (all types, oral, written, interpellations), resolutions (formal parliamentary positions on CoFoE adopted by committee or plenary), committee meetings (public and closed; EAC and other), information reports (e.g., by committee or parliamentary administration), press releases (by parliament/party groups), events (“external” with citizens and/or civil society, where parliament was (co-)organiser), and hearings (with

Table 12.1 National parliamentary activities related to CoFoE.

<i>National parliament</i>	<i>Plenary debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary questions</i>	<i>Resolutions</i>	<i>Committee meetings / debates</i>	<i>Parliamentary information reports</i>	<i>Press releases</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Hearings</i>
Portuguese <i>Assembleia da República</i>	0	2	2	9	1	1	3	0
French <i>Assemblée Nationale & Sénat</i>	0	12	2	3	4	1	5	1
Czech <i>Poslanecká Sněmovna & Senát</i>	1	0	6	6	2	2	2	2
Swedish <i>Riksdag</i>	7	2	0	36	0	0	0	0
Spanish <i>Congreso & Senado</i>	0	3	2	12	0	0	0	3
German <i>Bundestag</i>	3	8	0	4	0	6	n/a*	1
Dutch <i>Tweede & Eerste Kamer</i>	5	1	6	continuous	1	1	3	3

Source: Authors' own compilation of information collected in the chapters of this book.

* reliable data not available (for some events organised by federal government, see Bundestag, 2021).

MEPs, delegation members, experts, etc., likely in committee) covering the run-up to CoFoE until its (ongoing) follow-up (end of 2023).

Apart from the Dutch parliament, no parliament can be considered “active” across all types of activities, but the parliaments focused on different activities and thereby prioritised different parliamentary functions in relation to CoFoE. While the Swedish *Riksdag* and the Dutch *Tweede & Eerste Kamer* invested heavily in domestic scrutiny of their executives and delegates to the plenary, Grinc concludes “that the Czech parliament neither systematically monitored the activities of its delegates, nor mandated them in any way” (Grinc in Chapter 6, p. 134). The Spanish parliament focused on its scrutiny function, but even more so on discussing the substance and policy recommendations of the CoFoE. The Mixed Committee of the two chambers dedicated comparably many sessions to the discussion of CoFoE: four of the 12 meetings were focused on scrutinising procedural aspects and accountability of the Spanish delegates, while the rest addressed substantive issues (see Oleart in Chapter 8, 160–162).

Overall, we saw various practices of the parliamentary delegations reporting back to their respective chambers. The Portuguese delegation had the practice of informing the EAC on the activities and the conclusions of the CoFoE Plenary sessions. It was a formalised procedure, whereby a report was prepared and approved by all the members of the delegation and disseminated to all the political groups and parliamentary committees. In contrast, the communication between the Czech delegates and their parliamentary chambers was mostly limited

to occasional sharing of impressions on the margins of EAC meetings, under “any other business”, or to short debriefs from COSAC meetings. The French chambers and the German *Bundestag* had in common their frequent use of parliamentary questions directed at their executive.

While some parliaments focused comparatively more on parliamentary activities that are aimed at reaching a broader public, that is, plenary debates or press releases (Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany), others were involved in organising national events that would directly link the participatory (citizens/civil society) with the representative (parliaments) dimension of CoFoE. The French parliament served as a ‘hub of ideas’ promoting several initiatives to stimulate debate on the future of Europe and EU institutional reforms. The scope and thematic agenda of the events reflected the French parliament’s ambition to shape the discussion on potential reform ideas, with the aim of strengthening the role of parliamentary actors in the EU. The Portuguese parliament was active in liaising with citizens and in external communication with society through organising events at the national and regional level in partnership with the Portuguese government, the EP Liaison Office in Portugal, the representation office of the European Commission, the National Association of Portuguese Municipalities, the Economic and Social Council, and the National Youth Council. The Spanish parliament’s Mixed Committee was very active in connecting with external guests who provided input to its debates on CoFoE, including academics, civil society actors, think tankers, but also European and regional parliamentarians. Regional parliaments also emphasised different types of activities, with the regional parliaments of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg in Germany, and of Burgenland in Austria being especially engaged across a wide range of activities.

When it comes to the factors that may explain different levels and types of activities, we have to be a bit cautious not to over-interpret the empirical findings. What we can say, however, is that the following factors seem to have shaped parliamentary involvement in CoFoE: first, we saw limited involvement of national parliaments due to important external events such as the Russian war on Ukraine, but also the Covid-19 pandemic that shifted the focus away from the Conference. Second, (initial) scepticism towards the process and its outcome (especially treaty reform) – if anything – made parliaments more active, that is, the Dutch and the Swedish parliaments. Third, Presidency parliaments (Portugal, France, the Czech Republic) attempted to assume more responsibility for coordination among the national parliaments as well as between them and the EP (see also section on inter-parliamentary cooperation below).

Finally, they used their established practices, channels, and ways of working on EU affairs to deal with CoFoE (see Abels in Chapter 11 for regional parliaments), which does not mean that formally stronger parliaments were necessarily more active in CoFoE. Sweden was, Germany to a lesser extent. If anything, it seems that some of the institutionally weaker parliaments in EU affairs (France, Portugal) were among the more active ones, but this may also be a function of their country’s Council Presidency. For the French parliament, or at least for some of its representatives, the CoFoE represented a clear opportunity structure to voice its EU-oriented proposals for parliamentary empowerment. Among others, the idea of the green card has re-emerged as a formal citizens’ recommendation of the CoFoE in its final report.

Unusual Experiment, but Party Politics as Usual?

When it comes to the question of how political parties engaged with the process and the outcome of the CoFoE, we see a rather homogenous pattern across our cases. Politicisation of CoFoE developed along existing partisan conflict lines in terms of left-right and pro- versus anti-EU positions. For instance, in Germany, we observed the existing dividing line in EU affairs between the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and the other (pro-EU mainstream) parliamentary party groups. In the Swedish parliament, party groups assumed quite a unified position towards the CoFoE, aimed at preserving the status quo, albeit for different reasons. Discussions among parliamentary parties had a more sceptical and hesitant thrust but were overall little politicised as CoFoE sparked no major controversy, neither within parliament nor between parliament and the executive.

In the national parliaments studied in this volume, radical right Eurosceptic parliamentary party groups followed different strategies towards CoFoE. While some chose to largely ignore CoFoE altogether, others were rather vocal about it and used it for their Eurosceptic populist agenda. For example, *Grinc* on the Czech parliament in Chapter 6 of this volume reports that “the most anti-EU opposition party SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) mentioned CoFoE only in passing, in connection with debates on treaty revision, which it rejected as a threat to national sovereignty” (p. 122). Similarly, the French Eurosceptics also chose to largely ignore the CoFoE, at least in the parliamentary arena. While the German AfD made a similar argument on opposing treaty revisions, it was more vocal and raised the salience of the issue in parliament. In Spain, the pro-EU mainstream parliamentary parties were focused on the exclusion of the extreme right Vox, a party that challenges the EU and deeper integration from a nationalist and nativist ideology.

Interestingly, the reasons for criticising the participatory nature of the CoFoE differed among the Eurosceptics. While radical right populists in some parliaments criticised CoFoE for not being participatory and inclusive enough and accused mainstream parties of deceiving citizens (e.g., the German AfD), Swedish Eurosceptics from both the left (Left party) and the right (Swedish Democrats) expressed straightforward opposition to the very idea of this participatory experiment. As Kaniok reports, Left Party’s MP Ilona Szatmari Waldau, for example, reiterated her party’s belief “that representative democracy is based on elected representatives and national parliaments, not statistical samples of the population” (Kaniok in Chapter 7, p. 145).

The left-right divide manifested itself in the different policy priorities emphasised by the national parties with regard to CoFoE, for example, climate change, social policy or security and migration. Interestingly, we noted contradictions between the positions of some national parliamentary party groups and their European counterparts. The above example of the Swedish Left contradicts the common position of the European Left (GUE-NGL), endorsing CoFoE as a tool for participatory democracy aimed at reforming and further integrating the EU (see Chapter 3 by Kotýnek Krotký in this volume).

No Parliamentary Dimension without Political Entrepreneurs

Some parliaments clearly acted as institutional entrepreneurs in the CoFoE. The French and Portuguese parliaments were inter-parliamentary entrepreneurs focusing on coordinating national parliaments throughout the Conference. The Dutch and Swedish parliaments were pragmatic entrepreneurs, the former watering down too ambitious institutional reform proposals, but championing citizens' involvement; the latter assertively defended the status quo. Some German-speaking regional parliaments were path-dependent entrepreneurs using CoFoE to push for direct engagement and a stronger role of the regions. At the same time, the Czech and Spanish parliaments were less entrepreneurial by comparison.

Individual M(E)Ps also acted as entrepreneurs. Oleart reports for Spain that "national delegates to the CoFoE Plenary did not act as domestic entrepreneurs of the proposals developed within the Conference" (Oleart in Chapter 8, p. 170), while Spanish MEP Domènec Ruiz Devesa (S&D) emerged as a "European political entrepreneur, primarily as an agent of the European Parliament, championing the legislative initiative for the EP and transnational lists for the European elections in the CoFoE plenary" (p. 159). Individual entrepreneurship was also particularly visible among the "Presidency parliaments": Jean François Rapin, Chairman of the Senate's EAC, and Pieyre Alexandre Anglade, Vice-Chairman of the National Assembly's EAC in France. Czech Vice-President of the Senate, Jitka Seitlová, the Portuguese Chair of the EAC, Luís Capoulas Santos, and the President of the Bavarian *Landtag* (state parliament), Ilse Aigner, just to name a few.

The Representative–Participatory Interface: How much did MPs Synergise with Citizens?

The research conducted in this volume revealed that parliamentarians across the political spectrum have quite different attitudes towards enhancing participatory democracy in EU affairs. While some call for a stronger and more direct engagement of citizens in EU decision-making, others do not view such citizen involvement as complementary to their own representative roles. Across the chapters, the authors identified multiple instances of perceived "legitimacy clashes" in parliamentary statements of MPs and MEPs coming from different parties or member states regarding an increased engagement of citizens in EU governance via CoFoE.

On the one hand, MPs from the German FDP, SPD, or the Spanish PSOE, called for institutionalisation of more forms of direct democracy like EU Citizens Panels and EU-wide referenda as a result of the CoFoE. In a similar vein, the Dutch parliamentary delegation prioritised ensuring that citizen input was taken seriously, even when citizens' recommendations differed significantly from that of the parliamentary delegates. On the other hand, the Swedish MPs from across the board, or the Czech MPs from the Mayors and Independents Party (*Starostové a nezávislí*, STAN) and Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (*Akce nespokojených občanů*, ANO, English: Yes) were sceptical about Citizens Panels being more than consultative bodies. Some perceive reforming the EU based on citizens' recommendations as a

threat to their roles, distorting representative democracy, or simply as a sign of political incompetence. Among the French MPs, there was a prominent division: The CoFoE delegate of the National Assembly from the Renaissance party leaned towards a more progressive approach, while the delegate of the Senate from the Republicans expressed scepticism and emphasised representative democracy and the important role of national parliaments within it. The German AfD used CoFoE for a populist, unspecified call for “a truly direct democracy”, while deeming the CoFoE unrepresentative and a “perversion of what direct or representative democracy should be” (see Chapter 9 by Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Sus in this book).

Inter-parliamentary Cooperation – Lots of Hope but Little Effect

The analyses conducted in this volume confirm that that CoFoE has provided a real-life laboratory for testing the potential of inter-parliamentary relations in the field of EU affairs. On the one hand, the agenda and ambitions of the Conference convenors have provided national parliaments with a platform for forging a strategic alliance among those who wish to do so, to push concrete proposals in particular policy directions. On the other hand, CoFoE provided an opportunity to foster vertical relations between national parliaments and the EP, understood as two sides of the same coin of EU representative democracy, yet highlighting the EP’s greater stake in liaising with its national counterparts rather than vice versa. The chapters reveal that despite genuine efforts by some parliamentary actors – like the Portuguese or the French parliamentary presidencies – these opportunities have not been successfully exploited. The two parliamentary pillars – MPs and MEPs – not only failed to endorse a Joint Declaration at the end of the CoFoE on how to strengthen parliamentary democracy in the EU, but the EP also refrained from signing the conclusions of the COSAC Working Group on the role of national parliaments in the EU. The dynamics of the CoFoE process revealed not only multiple cross-party and cross-institutional legitimacy clashes, but also pointed to missed opportunities offered by the multi-level democratic character of that transnational deliberative process.

Horizontal Cooperation: Ambitions did not Match Reality

Regarding the horizontal inter-parliamentary cooperation among national parliaments, the chapters show that the reality on the ground did not correspond to the ambitions and expectations articulated by the various parliamentary actors ahead of the Conference. While the Portuguese and French parliaments invested considerable efforts in leveraging COSAC, the best known and most established inter-parliamentary format, to coordinate communication and shape positions of the national parliamentary component, these efforts were not met with equal engagement of the other chambers. The Portuguese parliament developed a high degree of ownership of the CoFoE and actively engaged to revitalise inter-parliamentary cooperation in the first half of 2021. The French parliament played a crucial, and protagonist role in coordinating inter-parliamentary cooperation during the second

part of the Conference, in the first half of 2022. As reported by Grinc (Chapter 6), representatives of the Czech parliament used inter-parliamentary platforms to remind everybody that national parliaments should be the ones that represent the interests of the citizens, yet no substantial synergies were built to put this representative intermediation into action. Even in smaller formats, no such initiatives followed, despite, for instance, the declaration of the Visegrád Four (V4) chambers to commit to active participation in the CoFoE as well as to coordinating their efforts to pursue proposals advanced by all V4 member states.

According to Van Keulen in this volume (Chapter 10), CoFoE exposed political differences among the 39 national chambers and their representatives. One clear illustration was the diverging positions on the process of finalising the Joint Declaration of the two parliamentary components, in which conflicting views among national chambers eventually prevented the acceptance of the text. Moreover, as reported by *Van Keulen*, the consultation among all the chambers did not work very smoothly, with some chambers amending texts for the plenaries without consulting others, which undermined mutual trust.

From the outset, a significant obstacle to fostering synergies among national MPs was the absence of a genuine coordinating centre that could act as an ‘honest broker’ among the various political and national positions. As rightly pointed out by Dias Pinheiro (Chapter 4), neither the COSAC Troika, nor the Portuguese or French Presidencies had a mandate during the Conference to collectively act and speak on behalf of national parliaments within CoFoE. Contrary to the three EU institutions, which had adopted their positions and mandates on the aim and the setup of the Conference ahead of negotiations on the Joint Declaration, there was no initial common position or mandate adopted by NPs that could guide any of the COSAC Presidencies with regard to the concrete governance setup of the CoFoE. While this non-binding nature is a common feature of inter-parliamentary cooperation, as defined in Articles 9 and 10 of Protocol 1 of the Lisbon Treaty, the failed effort to produce a Joint Declaration shows that national parliaments have not yet managed to coordinate themselves in a way that enables them to co-create the EU agenda and, as a collective, become true multi-arena players (Auel and Neuhold, 2017).

Vertical Cooperation between the EP and National Parliaments: A Missed Opportunity

While it is hard to say whether the failure to adopt the Joint Declaration and to jointly endorse the conclusions of the COSAC Working Groups was rather due to horizontal or vertical discrepancies among parliamentary actors, the data gathered by our contributors reveal that, before the launch of the CoFoE, the EP did not exhibit a very accommodating attitude towards inter-parliamentary cooperation. As mentioned above, Guy Verhofstadt warned the EP that it should be “aware” and “very careful” about national parliaments’ engagement in the Conference to prevent them from taking over the process (European Parliament, 2019).

At the same time, as reported by our contributors, many national chambers expressed high expectations regarding the involvement of national parliaments in

the Conference, alongside their formal role and status in the process. Evidently, many national MPs perceived the design of CoFoE as a step back compared to the previous exercise of this nature, the Convention on the Future of Europe. As reported by Oleart (Chapter 8), even MPs from the pro-EU mainstream parties negatively contrasted their status within CoFoE with the 2002 Convention, in which national parliaments were on equal footing with the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council. As observed by these MPs, the effectiveness of the contributions made by national parliaments during CoFoE “depended on our [MPs] will, on our [MPs] capacity for action, but not on the institutional position in which the national parliaments have been placed, which has been a step below the three other institutions” (Chapter 8 by Oleart in this volume, p. 165).

If we add to this the absence of a genuine coordination centre that could accommodate and broker a compromise position among the chambers, we clearly see the different strategic, institutional, and political positions the two sets of institutions occupied within CoFoE as “host” and “guests” respectively. The EP had a very concrete and targeted agenda of what it wanted to achieve as an outcome of the Conference, whereas the approach of national parliaments was more fragmented, characterised by a certain lack of trust. This state of affairs fostered inter-parliamentary tensions and a kind of “power play” fuelled by contrasting ideological stances of some of the MPs and MEPs with regard to further EU integration. The failed CoFoE-related Joint Declaration by the two parliamentary components was perceived by the national parliaments as mostly about strengthening the EP, while COSAC WGs’ conclusions were perceived by the EP as mostly strengthening the NPs.

Against this background, it is all the more remarkable that national parliaments and the EP actually adopted some common positions on specific issues. For example, there were several COSAC contributions that highlighted the importance of CoFoE and of having national parliaments involved on an equal footing. Yet, when it came to the eventual endorsement of proposals such as transnational lists or the lead candidate system, there were no majorities, and inter-institutional initiatives were blocked. This included initiatives that would have strengthened the positions of national parliaments through granting them a green card or the right to refer written questions to EU institutions.

Furthermore, the analyses conducted by authors in this volume also reveal that the European political groups could have used their vertically oriented intra-party channels much more (effectively) to liaise and synergise between the EP and the national parliamentary arenas. For example, as reported by Oleart (Chapter 8), one of the most vocal supporters and a visible entrepreneur of CoFoE and EU reforms, socialist MEP Domènec Ruiz Devesa, could have seized the opportunity to communicate much more intensively with the national level to effectively cooperate with like-minded MPs from the socialist party to channel pro-EU ideas down to the national and regional levels. It seems, at least publicly, even the very active CoFoE entrepreneurs did not frequent their national parliaments very much, beyond the usual institutionalised exchanges (e.g., Valentin, 2016) to spread the spirit of CoFoE and show national MPs that they also have a stake in this process, for

example by supporting certain reform proposals enhancing the role of parliaments vis-à-vis executive dominance. Yet, since intra-party relations are not unidirectional, the same would apply to pro-EU MPs and to the cooperation with their EU-level counterparts. Based on our empirical evidence, pro-EU MPs did not seem to have taken advantage of the opportunity to act as agents of Europeanisation by synergising with same-party MEPs to increase citizens' awareness of the CoFoE, to explain the transnational nature of public policies and decision-making processes, and thus to bolster their own roles as true intermediaries between the multiple *demoi* (Nicolaidis, 2012) and the EU. Such a party-political disconnection during the Conference has surely not helped to close the existing communication and narrative gaps between the EU level, perceived by many citizens as “another planet”, and the national level, whose pro-EU representatives could have invested more in creating a genuinely transnational narrative about the domestic and the EU arenas as overlapping realms in a multi-level polity.

National Parliaments and the EP: Common Executive Accountability in the Future?

Another way of understanding the intermediary role of national parliaments jointly with the EP was defined by Guy Verhofstadt during the Inter-parliamentary Committee Meeting on the conclusions of the CoFoE and the role of national parliaments in the European Union, which took place on 26 October 2022. Verhofstadt stated:

So that means that there is between the national parliaments and the European Parliament *a common work to do* that is to ask to our national governments, members of the European Council, to take a decision on the request that has been formulated. And that is crucial to implement a high number, an important number of the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe. I am pretty sure that *if we work together to do that from European Parliament and the national Parliaments side*, we could expect a positive response by the end of the year when the European Council will be meeting (...) and has the possibility to decide on that. (emphasis added).

(European Parliament, 2022)

From this statement by one of the most federalist entrepreneurs of the EP, we can see that despite the failure of the Joint Declaration described by Sacriste and Borońska-Hryniewiecka in this volume (Chapter 5), several months after the conclusion of the CoFoE, there was a clear expectation on the side of the EP that national parliaments should nevertheless pressure their governments to implement the Conference's recommendations, as well as a conviction that the two parliamentary components should continue to work in synergy on this matter. Whether that was only putting on a good face for a bad game or a genuine expression of hope from the EP, remains to be explored, potentially through more in-depth qualitative interviews with the main actors. Importantly, after the CoFoE, some of the representatives of national parliaments called for an improved inter-parliamentary cooperation. An

example is the speech by French Senator Francois Rapin, one of the main French entrepreneurs advocating for a strengthened role of national parliaments in the EU, delivered at the same meeting a few minutes after Verhofstadt:

The COSAC Working Group on the role of national parliaments, which I have the honour of chairing, has come up with some proposals including the yellow card procedure or the green card procedure (...). I regret the European Parliament moved away from the conclusions even though I listened to Mr Verhofstadt just now. But we've worked on these points together. In the next plenary meeting of COSAC in Prague in November, I hope we can reach a broad consensus on these conclusions. We have major crises in Europe. *Let's not have a sterile institutional quarrel.* Let's concentrate on the idea of making the EU more efficient and closer to the actual concerns of citizens. It's in this way that will avoid the rise of populism and extremism throughout Europe (emphasis added).

The “broad consensus” had to be further compromised in Prague, as both the EP and the Swedish delegation (as the forthcoming COSAC Presidency) were against the adoption of the conclusions of the COSAC Working Groups. At the end of the day, the EP's position did not change, and it abstained from endorsing the document. The COSAC Plenary conclusions on this topic finished with an enigmatic sentence that the debate shall continue the common understanding of the role of national parliaments in the EU and the instruments necessary to fulfil it (COSAC, 2022).

Implications for EU Democracy and Future Research Agenda

The comparative findings from our edited volume offer valuable insights into how and why parliaments, political parties, and individual parliamentarians participated – or did not participate – in the transnational deliberative process of CoFoE. The chapters also shed light on the extent to which parliamentary actors engaged in horizontal and vertical inter-parliamentary cooperation. These findings have important implications for how representative and participatory democracy align in EU multi-level governance and open avenues for future research.

The analyses of CoFoE as an experiment that links representative with participatory democracy have revealed that parliamentarians do not always view the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making processes as complementary to their own work. Some of them perceive this voluntary opening of representative democracy as competition to their own representative role. This state of affairs, together with differing expectations among representatives and citizens, leads to ‘legitimacy clashes’ and we have seen those emerge across parties and parliaments throughout the CoFoE. These findings, while interesting and notable, are based on a specific sample of parliamentarians within the unique institutional context of the EU-steered process of CoFoE.

Future research on ongoing citizens' assemblies in the EU should continue to use survey methods or interviews to study representatives' expectations and perceptions of these forums, both at national and EU levels (e.g., Junius et al.,

2020 for 15 European countries; Wilker, 2019 for the municipal level), to learn what they think about increased citizen involvement in public governance, and how they envisage an optimal interconnection of participatory and representative democracy. Which democratic innovations do they prefer; and what determines their attitudes? When parliamentarians see the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making processes as complementary to their work, synergies may arise from the interaction of participatory democracy with parliamentary decision-making. If, on the contrary, parliamentarians see participatory democracy as a competition for their own roles, we can expect legitimacy clashes between the two worlds. It is important that we compare the views of representatives with existing knowledge on attitudes of citizens towards alternative models of public policy-making in general (e.g., Gherghina, and Geissel, 2017) and various participatory instruments in particular (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2020; Van der Does and Kantorowicz, 2021).

Our finding that national parliaments and the European Parliament initially had mutual reservations at the beginning of CoFoE, seeing each other only gradually as potential allies, has another significant implication for EU democracy. Among some, there still seems to be an initial perception as competitors, where self-empowerment is viewed as a ‘zero-sum-game’ of either national parliaments or the EP becoming more powerful in EU governance. Yet, as explained in the conceptual Chapter 1, cooperation across the levels is crucial for strengthening both parliamentary pillars and enhancing transnational accountability within the EU system. In this context, fulfilling the potential of the “multilevel parliamentary field” (Crum and Fossum, 2009) could help counteract the surge of Euroscepticism, successes of populist parties as well as the disenchantment of citizens with the grand idea of the ‘European project’. To advance research able to provide sensible recommendations to remedy this situation, we need further investigation to understand the conditions fostering constructive partnerships rather than rivalry among MPs and MEPs in different policy fields within the multi-level parliamentary field.

In light of these findings, our edited volume paves the way for a new research agenda focused on investigating the optimal co-construction of the multi-level representative-participatory interface in the EU from a theoretical and empirical perspective. Against the background of an ongoing crisis of representation and the shortcomings of a depoliticised ‘citizen turn’ as a potential ‘silver bullet’ (see also Introduction and Chapter 1 by Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski in this book), academics and decision-makers alike need to think about ways of integrating various participatory democratic innovations into EU representative democracy (e.g., Jacquet, Ryan, and Van der Does, 2023; Jäske, and Setälä, 2020), while acknowledging that, after all, representative democracy and parliaments are here to stay. We therefore hope that our book will provide a valuable source of insights for representatives in national parliaments as well as in the newly elected European Parliament (2024–2029), and prompt them to rethink their relationship with citizens in the ever-evolving transnational democratic space of the European Union.

Notes

- 1 It was the European Commission DG Communication who contracted the public opinion polling company KANTAR to conduct the process of random selection of citizens.
- 2 We exclude the regional parliaments here for comparability reasons but see Abels in Chapter 11 of this volume for details on their activities.

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