

Report

Workshop with members of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium

2 March 2020

The future of the EU from a regional perspective



Büro Wien | REGIOPARL Projektleitung
Georg Sigl-Gasse 1/3
A-1090 Wien

www.regioparl.com | regioparl@eudemlab.org

Büro Berlin
European Democracy Lab an der European School of Governance (eusg)
Kirchstraße 1
D-10557 Berlin



On 2 March 2020, the Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium hosted a visit by the REGIOPARL| Regional Parliaments Lab international research project. REGIOPARL focuses on the role of regional parliaments within the European community, and discusses the EU's future development from a regional perspective with MPs. The workshop is part of the REGIOPARL event series on the future of Europe, run in a number of Europe's regional parliaments by the project teams from the Danube University Krems and European Democracy Lab at the European School of Governance (EUSG) in Berlin since 2019.

Regional parliaments as the link to the general public

The event at the Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium began with the project director giving a short **presentation of the research project**. 'We want our events at regional parliaments to create an innovative space in which MPs can contribute their own personal visions and ideas about the future of Europe', explained Dr Sarah Meyer, political scientist at the Danube University Krems and director of the research project.

She added that the debate over the EU's future, which has been running since Britain's Brexit vote, has often failed to properly take into account the perspectives of regional political players. And yet regional parliaments and their members act as an important link to citizens, and should thus also have their voices heard in the debate

about Europe's further development. This, according to Dr Meyer, is now all the more urgent, given that EU institutions are currently in negotiations over setting up a conference on the future of Europe – a two-year process during which the future of the EU is set to be re-explored with European citizens. Dr Meyer ended her presentation with an overview of each of the five future scenarios for the EU, as presented in 2017 by then-president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, in the white paper on the future of Europe. These range from 'carrying on' to the ambitious 'doing much more together.'

INFOBOX: The REGIOPARL workshop series

- *Workshops on the future of Europe from a regional perspective*
- *Participants: Members of regional parliaments across Europe*
- *5 workshops in 2019: Lower Austria, Bavaria, Galicia and Andalusia.*
- *Workshops in 2020, in addition to Eupen, will include Wallonia; other workshops are currently being planned*
- *Aim of the workshops: To develop and discuss scenarios for a democratic and efficient EU of the future.*
- *Three focus areas:*
 - 1. Institutional architecture**
 - 2. Distribution of authorities**
 - 3. Regions& territorial structure**

Workshop in Eupen: A particular region’s perspective

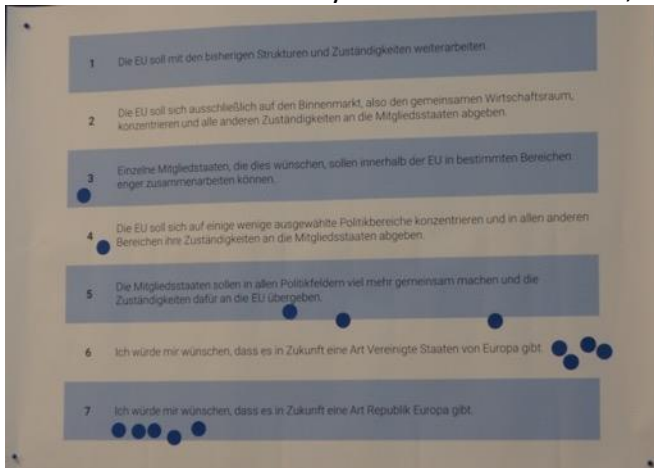
The German-speaking Community of Belgium is a particularly fascinating case in the REGIOPARL workshop series. By virtue of the three communities encompassed under this name being firmly established in the Belgian constitution, representation across other criteria, such as language and shared cultural roots, also plays an important role in the political system – in addition to territorial representation. In view of this, the discussion about possible future scenarios for the European Union with members of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium was of particular interest to REGIOPARL.

This was followed by a **keynote speech by Prof. Ulrike Guérot**, from the Danube University Krems, who outlined her alternative scenario of a European republic: A republic comprised of 50-60 regions, with a ‘real’ bicameral system in which citizens are represented by members of the European Parliament, and regions are represented by senators in a senate (NB: A summary of the presentation will be sent with this report).



Scenarios for Europe

As outlined at the start by the REGIOPARL team, the debate over the future of Europe has so far primarily focused on the scenarios presented by former EU Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, in the *White paper on the future of Europe*. These range from ‘carrying on’, to a Europe of differing speeds, to increased involvement in all areas of politics. To kick off the discussion, the MPs were invited to choose – from among these scenarios and Ulrike Guérot’s concept of a European republic – the scenario they considered politically desirable.



The spread of votes across the various scenarios clearly demonstrated that the participants wouldn’t favour ‘carrying on’ or limiting the EU’s areas of authority to a single market. The most popular concepts were the ‘united states of Europe’ and the ‘European republic’, which did away with the level of nation states and allowed for a regional and European level within the political structure.

A new narrative for the European project?

As the discussion continued, the participants were invited to explain their views on the EU of the future, and point out any existing difficulties. There was repeated mention of issues such as how the EU could be embedded in a new narrative in order for it to once again be considered a positive concept and to generate new political momentum.

The majority of MPs attested to the fact that the European Community's promise of peace is no longer enough to get citizens excited about the idea of Europe, and that the EU has essentially had an image problem since its eastern expansion in this respect. A 'mobilisation narrative' was proposed as a solution, with a view to reinvigorating the former European community of values.



Parliamentary President Karl-Heinz Lambertz, who has long-time experience in the political structures of the EU – most recently as president of the Committee of the Regions –, stated that the jockeying between EU institutions has resulted in the EU leaving problems unaddressed, despite its former success story as a post-war project of peace and economics:

'We're looking at a situation of undemocratic decision-making in the distribution of authority across the Commission, Council and Parliament, which can only be rectified through contractual changes. The EU needs a proper government and a bicameral system in which the regions are also represented. This is the only way to solve the problems that have arisen as a result of factors such as the introduction of the euro, which did not involve appropriate compensatory measures at a fiscal level.'

It was also noted that the EU's most recent expansion had not involved any adjustment to the institutional system, and was now regularly failing due to national egoism. In light of this, several participants shared their considerations as to the problems the member states would not be able to solve on their own, i.e. where the EU constituted added value. Climate change, digitisation and migration were particularly cited as major 'fear-inducing issues' of our time, to which the EU needed to find an answer.

Possible concrete changes that would be necessary in the institutional framework of the EU, in the distribution of authorities between a global, European, national and regional level, and in the regional subdivision of Europe in order to solve current problems and create an ideal EU of the future were then discussed intensively in three groups.



Institutional reform or work in known structures?

There were also extensive proposals in relation to possible institutional reforms in the EU of the future. This included introducing a bicameral system at an EU level, in which the regions have representation as part of a second chamber. But this perspective was not shared by all participants. The call for a clear increase in directly democratic participation instruments was also a contentious topic of discussion, while notion of the European Parliament's 'clout' within its current constitution similarly met with a mixed reaction. There was widespread consensus regarding the criticism of the principle of unanimity, which member states saw as being a key cause of the regular blockades. And the desire to democratise decision-making processes was also raised a number of times.

New responsibilities – a more effective co-operation?

The second group focused on potentially redistributing authorities between the various levels. Most participants were in favour of member states ceding more authority and responsibility to other levels – regional or European – in order to facilitate a more reasonable co-operation, and they agreed that foreign and security policy should, in future, be handled at a European level rather than by the nation state. Health policy was another particularly sensitive area to be mentioned, and was seen as both a global issue and as a matter for the European or nation-state level.

A regional reorganisation of Europe?

Tying in closely with the institutional structuring and organisation of authorities at various levels of political decision-making, the third group discussed how a political commonwealth could be organised based on various criteria (territorial, linguistic, historic, functional etc.). The participants agreed that decisions regarding the structuring of political representation can only ever work through dialogue with the citizens, i.e. bottom-up, and that decisions on this matter should not be made on the 'drawing board', as it were.

Elements of a regional identity, such as language and culture, were mentioned less as being defining or divisive, and rather, on the contrary, as being connective, with Belgium and the German-speaking Community being cited as European pioneers in terms of the way they have embraced an openness to multilingualism and cultural diversity. As such, there was less talk about a regional 'identity' and more about a regional 'reality', which was particularly reflected in concrete everyday practices, work relationships and personal relationships.

Outlook: A Europe of the regions?

A final plenary discussion saw the participants recapitulate the group-based discussions, referring, on various occasions, to the idea of a Europe of the regions, which was met with resounding approval as food for thought. They were also in agreement over the fact that clearly distinguishing between considerations regarding the institutional framework of a future EU and the distribution of authorities between the EU, member states and regions is difficult, and that it would be impossible to discuss both matters independently from one another.

As part of its workshop series, the REGIOPARL team will also look into these issues during further discussions with members of the regional parliaments of various EU member states. Following successful events in Bavaria, Lower Austria and Andalusia, the next workshop will be held with the Wallonian parliament. The REGIOPARL event series with regional parliaments will continue throughout the year in a bid to consistently focus on the important regional perspective in the ongoing debates about the EU's future.

The REGIOPARL team would like to sincerely thank the members and staff of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium for attending the event and for their fascinating and important discussion contributions, which are critical to the success of the REGIOPARL research project. Particular thanks go to the chairman of the committee, Karl-Heinz Lambertz, for his support in running the event.