

Parliamentary Voices on the Future of Europe

Digital Conference

28 and 29 May 2019

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Conference Report



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Digital Conference, 28 & 29 May 2020

Governance in Europe is built on a diverse multi-level parliamentary system, making parliaments at all levels – European, national, and subnational – key actors in the functioning of any democratic political process involving the future of Europe. This is why parliaments took centre stage in the two-day digital conference, which brought together academics and policy makers from all political levels – European, national, and subnational – in order to encourage an exchange of views between politics and academia.

The event touched upon various issues of parliamentary involvement in the European Union (EU), such as the democratic legitimacy of EU politics, parliamentary scrutiny of European policies and Europeanisation of national and subnational parliaments. Aiming at fostering a debate between research and politics, it brought together a number of outstanding experts from academia and politics, who contributed to very insightful and lively debates on (1) the current state of play of parliamentary voices in the EU and (2) opportunities and obstacles for a strengthening of parliamentary voices in the future of the EU, in general, and in the upcoming EU Conference on the Future of Europe to be kicked-off in autumn, in particular.

This conference report presents a summary of the various programme points, including keynotes and Q&A sessions as well as panel discussions and roundtables.

Organisers & partners

The conference was jointly organised by the **Jagiellonian University Kraków**, Institute of European Studies, and **Danube University Krems**, Department for European Policy and the Study of Democracy, in cooperation with the European Democracy Lab at the European School of Governance and other partners under the framework of the research project **REGIOPARL | Regional Parliaments Lab** that is conducted in cooperation with Forum Morgen.

Originally planned to take place at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, the conference was transformed into a digital event in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The programme included pre-recorded keynote speeches (still available on the conference website) as well as live sessions, including Q&A with keynote speakers, panel discussions and academic roundtables.

For more details, please visit the conference website:
<https://www.regioparl.com/parliamentary-voices-on-the-future-of-europe/?lang=en>

Programme Overview

Day 1, 28 May 2020	
Keynote 1 <i>National parliaments and the Future of Europe: co-responsibility, competition or caving in?</i>	Ass. Prof. Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka University of Wrocław
Keynote 2 <i>Regional parliaments in the EU: normative, theoretical and empirical considerations</i>	Prof. Peter Bursens University of Antwerp
Panel 1 <i>What does the debate on the Future of Europe hold for parliaments in the EU?</i> Moderator: Prof. Gabriele Abels University of Tübingen	Prof. Ulrike Guérot Danube University Krems Karl-Heinz Lambertz President of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium Tobias Gotthardt Member of the Bavarian State Parliament Eugen Freund Former Member of the European Parliament
Panel 2 <i>The Debate on the Future of Europe: Inter- and intra-institutional perspectives</i> Moderator: Prof. Andreas Maurer University of Innsbruck	Daniel Freund Member of the European Parliament Gaby Bischoff Member of the European Parliament Sophia Russack Researcher at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)
Day 2, 29 May 2020	
Keynote 3 <i>Polish perspectives on the Future of Europe</i>	Prof. Zdzisław Mach Jagiellonian University Kraków
Roundtable 1 <i>Europeanisation of national and subnational parliaments</i> Moderator: Dr. Sarah Meyer Danube University Krems	Ass. Prof. Eric Miklin University of Salzburg Prof. Andreas Maurer University of Innsbruck Prof. Gabriele Abels University of Tübingen
Roundtable 2 <i>National and subnational parliament as legitimisers of EU processes and outcomes?</i> Moderator: Ass. Prof. Elisabeth Donat Danube University Krems	Dr. Daniela Ingruber Danube University Krems, Austrian Democracy Lab Dr. Sarah Meyer Danube University Krems, REGIOPARL Prof. Peter Bursens University of Antwerp

Keynote 1: National parliaments and the Future of Europe: co-responsibility, competition or caving in?

Ass. Prof. Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka, University of Wrocław

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka introduced the '3 Cs trilemma' – a concept she developed to describe the different functions national parliaments can take vis-à-vis the EU and European policy making. The Cs stand for 'co-responsibility', 'competition' and 'caving in'. Borońska-Hryniewiecka postulated that the co-responsibility of national parliaments towards EU politics was falling behind the two remaining Cs of the trilemma (regarding ownership and implementation of EU policies at national level and their function as a bridge between citizens and

the supranational EU level). Competition describes the outcome of the marginalisation of national parliaments in the ongoing process of European integration. Caving in refers to the fact that national parliaments, for various reasons, do not make full use of their powers when it comes to EU related issues. She closed by advocating for a deepened cooperation between executives and EU institutions as well as a better connection between parliaments and citizens to strengthen co-responsibility in relation to the other two Cs of the trilemma.

Keynote 2: Regional parliaments in the EU: normative, theoretical and empirical considerations

Prof. Peter Bursens, University of Antwerp

Focusing on regional parliaments, **Peter Bursens** elaborated on their various (potential) functions within the institutional setup of the EU. In addition to his assessment of the status quo, Bursens offered an analysis of normative functions of regional assemblies. He stated that there was an imbalance between the fact that the EU defines itself as a representative democracy and the domination of executive actors over legislative actors within the EU. He also emphasised the trilemma of market integration,

parliamentary democracy and national sovereignty. This trilemma essentially implies that not all three aspects can be implemented properly at once since every combination of two aspects influences the third one in a negative way. According to Bursens, the strengthening of multilevel parliamentarism in the EU would offer a way out of the trilemma. This requires both: institutional reform and changing practices. Regarding the latter, he called for a Europeanisation of national and regional parliamentary arenas.

Q&A Session Keynotes 1 & 2

During a Q&A session, participants had the opportunity to discuss the keynotes with the speakers. Asked about how to respond to the current reality of an even more intergovernmental EU, Peter Bursens made the case for a shift from executive to more legislative participation in EU policy making. In line with what Bursens labelled an opportunity-practice-gap, the response from regional parliaments to EU initiatives such as the Conference on the Future of Europe was described as generally low. Bursens attributed this to the limited political advantage to be gained in regional affairs from a project like the Future Conference.

Moving on to the issue of national sovereignty vis-à-vis EU supranationalism, Bursens argued that strengthening federalism at the EU level was normatively preferably yet not feasible in short term.

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka emphasised the unused potential with a view to interparliamentary cooperation between regional and national parliaments. Strengthening such cooperation, she argued, would require behavioural change and a change of mindsets among deputies.

The Q&A closed with a discussion about potential negative consequences of further European integration and the question of regional parliaments' incentive to get involved more actively in EU issues, when their members experience that engagement was not worth their effort. Peter Bursens especially pointed to the fact that many regional parliaments tended to be Eurosceptic. Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka identified an increased amount of media coverage on the work of regional parliaments on EU issues as one possible mobilising factor.

Panel 1: What does the Future of Europe hold for Parliaments in the EU?

In the first panel, moderated by Prof. Gabriele Abels, Karl-Heinz Lambertz, Tobias Gotthardt, Eugen Freund and Prof. Ulrike Guérot discussed the role of parliaments in the future of the European Union as well as the democratic legitimacy of European policy making.

In her introductory remarks, **Gabriele Abels** pointed out that parliaments on regional, national and EU level had benefitted from institutional reforms, especially those of the Lisbon Treaty. She gave the floor to the panellists by asking: will the Conference on the Future of Europe attribute a role to regional parliaments, and if so in what way? **Karl-Heinz Lambertz** underlined how

crucial the regional level was for EU policy making as it “is the level which relates the citizens to the policy makers.”

Tobias Gotthardt agreed with this perspective and provided an overview of the EU-related activities of the Bavarian State Parliament, such as the participation in a project aimed at including a regional voice in the EU policy making process by

collecting inputs on the Commission's working programme from regional assemblies across Europe. He also expressed his regret over the fact that representatives from regional parliaments were not included in the setup of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Drawing a connection to current political debates, **Eugen Freund** pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic showed how in times of crisis nationalism takes over – a phenomenon which could also be observed in the EU budget negotiations. He argued that a return to nationalist approaches to EU policy making would diminish the role of the European Parliament and thus impede the democratic legitimacy of EU politics.

Ulrike Guérot offered an alternative way forward regarding the much-debated democratic deficit of the EU. In her model of a European Republic, Guérot sketches a European state following a republican

structure with small regional entities at the core of political decision making. The underlying principle would be 'one citizen, one vote', with a two-chamber system of political representation. Guérot criticised the current setup for the Conference on the Future of Europe as too complicated and as difficult to engage with for EU citizens.

The following discussion amongst the panellists and with the participants in the audience circled around the question of how to rebuild trust in the EU institutions, including concrete ways of interacting with citizens at regional level (Gotthardt). Lambertz stated that the EU first had to deliver on the issues it so far failed to find solutions for – and then solve its institutional problems. Adding meta-level considerations, Guérot raised concerns over the legitimacy of EU decision making at the moment and called for a broader debate on parliamentary representation in the EU.

Panel 2: The Debate on the Future of Europe: Inter- and intra-institutional perspectives

In the second conference panel, moderated by Prof. Andreas Maurer, discussions continued with inter- and intra-institutional perspectives on the debate on the future of Europe. Daniel Freund, Gaby Bischoff, and Sophia Russack offered some insights into the processes within and across the EU institutions with regards to the Conference on the Future of Europe and the future debate more broadly.

Andreas Maurer provided an introductory overview of the EU institutions' activities in the Conference on the Future of Europe process so far. Characterising the European Parliament as a very active player, he

stated that the European Commission had been taking a rather cautious position whereas the Council had remained quiet so far. He also pointed to the French-German proposal, which in his view were fairly

ambitious but lacked a response from other member states – a silence that Maurer attributed to the unresolved conflict on the question of including potential treaty changes into the debate.

This analysis was confirmed by **Daniel Freund**, who found it “puzzling that the Council draws red lines regarding treaty changes” as a potential result of the Conference on the Future of Europe process. He specified that the Parliament was in favour of an open and inclusive process, which should not exclude debates on new laws, budget distributions and ultimately treaty changes before it had even started. Freund also drew attention to the fact that the Future Conference does not have the same status as a convention, and therefore could only be a forum to *discuss* treaty changes, instead of actually changing the treaties.

Gaby Bischoff advocated for citizens to be involved in the process of the Future Conference from the beginning onwards, with inclusive citizens agoras such as suggested in the European Parliament resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe from January 2020. Regarding the hesitant to reluctant approaches by Commission and Council, Bischoff called upon civil society groups to increase the pressure on those institutions to allow for the Conference to start as the open format it should be.

From an institutionalist point of view, **Sophia Russack** made a pledge for ending institutional turf battles between

Parliament, Council and Commission and for cooperation rather than competition between the EU institutions. After a brief analysis of the unique institutional setup of the European Union, she concluded that any debate on EU institutional change needed to bear in mind the specificities of this setup. Realistically speaking, member states in the near- and mid-future would not agree to any treaty changes that would take competences away from them.

This perspective was challenged during the following debate, when Bischoff and Freund both reiterated that accepting the status quo as a given that cannot be challenged would eventually cause the EU to fall apart.

Questions from the conference audience included remarks on past citizens consultations, which failed to re-engage citizens and bring about actual change, the lack of a clear objective and goal of the Conference on the Future of Europe as well as a question on inter-institutional party linkages as a potential driver for institutional cooperation.

The lack of transparency of decision making processes in the Council was criticised, whilst national parliaments were identified as important partners for the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Bringing in a desired Europeanisation of national and regional parliamentary elections, Peter Bursens created a link to the roundtables of day 2 of the Parliamentary Voices Conference.

Keynote 3: Polish perspectives on the Future of Europe

Prof. Zdzisław Mach, Jagiellonian University Kraków

In recent years, dividing lines across EU member states went between North and South but also between East and West. Debates on the Future of Europe, thus, are structured very differently along those lines, leading to diverse political and societal discourses. Focusing on the Polish case, the second day of the conference opened with a keynote speech by Zdzisław Mach from Jagiellonian University. He started with contextualising different views on the EU among Polish political elites and

briefly outlined the construction of the Polish identity. The latter, he argued, played a crucial role in Poland's perception of the EU today. Specifically, he explained the process of 'Othering the EU', while introducing his concept of 'the EU as 'Santa Claus''. He concluded that Polish parties were neither in favor of a multi-speed EU, nor in support for a federal Europe but had a rather utilitarian perspective on the EU. In the following Q&A-Session, Zdzisław Mach specified his approach.

Q&A Session: Concerning his portrayal of 'the Polish perspective', Zdzisław Mach stressed that the Polish society was very divided on EU matters, naming three main types of divide in voting and political values: the rural-urban divide, among gender and between generations. This notion led to a discussion on the liberal potential in Polish civil society as opposed to the EU-sceptical views of politicians. Mach pointed out, however, that the rule of law and liberal values that civil society organisations often advocate for were not necessarily as important for Poles as government efficiency and protecting national interests from outside interference.

Other questions focused on EU issue-salience among different societal groups in Poland (Bursens) and on Mach's concept of the 'EU as Santa Claus' – being received

mainly as an external donor whose donations Poland is entitled to. Gabriele Abels challenged this concept by asking about conditionality of EU funding – 'Santa's black book' of good and bad behaviour. Mach clarified that his concept focused on the external nature of the EU from the Polish perspective.

Asked about an assessment of the EU's approach towards Poland when it comes to compliance with European values, Mach responded by highlighting that the only effective way to achieve compliance would be to limit the EU's financial support or to link EU funds to conditions. Most probably, however, this would mainly affect Polish citizens. Another possible solution he sketched was the redirecting of EU funds towards NGOs and local governments, who operated more in line with the EU's democratic values.

Roundtable 1: Europeanisation of national and subnational parliaments

The process of European integration not only led to the establishing of the European Parliament, but also largely affected parliaments at the national and subnational level. The first roundtable discussed how ‘Europeanised’ national and regional parliaments meanwhile have become, whether we can expect more engagement in the future, and what national and regional parliaments could learn from interest groups in terms of ‘lobbying’ EU institutions.

Focussing on national parliaments (NPs), **Eric Miklin** presented an optimistic and a pessimistic view on their current engagement in EU affairs. On the one hand, he saw ‘a glass half full’, with a trend towards an increase in power of NPs at the EU level (most recently with the Lisbon Treaty) and adaptations on the level of NPs (institutionally, increase in issue-politicisation etc.). The glass seems half-empty, however, on the legislative and communicative dimension. Continuing an interesting debate from the first conference day on whether institutional change or behavioural change was easier to achieve, Miklin argued that members of national parliaments behaved quite rationally in their limited focus on EU affairs and that, therefore, behavioural change was not very likely without institutional change.

Starting from the premise of an EU *multilevel* system of governance, **Gabriele Abels** referred to scholarly claims for the development of a *multilevel* parliamentary system as well. Therefore, she argued, including the so-called third (i.e. the subnational) level into the research agenda was very important. Abels concluded that so far there was only a limited degree of

‘Europeanisation’ at this level, though with large heterogeneity among regional parliaments due to different incentive structures. She stressed the importance of further developing the communicative function of these institutional actors and highlighted the importance of including non-legislative regional parliaments in analysis, too.

Andreas Maurer presented insights from a current study on the implementation of the European Parliament’s (EP) direct and indirect rights of initiative. He highlighted the various—though mostly indirect—available options that the EP already possesses in terms of initiative and presented findings from an analysis of how the European Commission responds to such initiatives (in a nutshell: always far too late and less often on EP legislative initiatives compared to non-legislative ones).

Turning to national and regional parliaments, Maurer argued that their focus on the Early Warning System prevents them from realising that the policy-process at the EU level already starts much earlier and that more attention should be devoted to the annual work programmes.

Roundtable 2: National and subnational parliaments as legitimisers of EU processes and outcomes

The second roundtable picked up the discussions of prior sessions and asked about the state of Europeanisation in regional parliaments. The presentations and comments focused on barriers for engagement but also on the expectations of voters as well as deputies' perceptions and the obligation to comply with EU law. The discussion revealed a research deficit at the individual level in terms of attitudes and behaviour of members of regional parliaments.

Peter Bursens shared his observation of modest, though growing Europeanisation among regional parliaments, which often have to deal with a prioritisation of executive over legislative actors in the EU's multilevel governance system. According to Bursens, concerns over "not making the current system too complex" could be one barrier to regional parliaments' engagement. Bursens questioned whether casual ways of participation were the only option of potential engagement: when comparing the 'known suspects', i.e. regional parliaments with legislative competencies, to regional assemblies or other types of regional representation, one could perhaps learn a lot from the latter regarding measures to be heard at various levels of political representation.

Sarah Meyer & Paul Kindermann presented first insights into research results from the REGIOPARL project. Discussing (non-representative) findings from a number of focus groups about the future of the EU with deputies from regional parliaments in four EU member states, they highlighted that participating regional MPs were willing to discuss options for further EU integration and changes in the division of

competences between the various political levels. Discussions did not reveal a 'regionalist bias' in favour of their respective region but focused on various options for a different decision making set-up. This was in line with concerns raised in regional deputies' assessment of the current functioning of the EU: Much of the critique on the latter was linked to questions of problem-solving and effective policy making.

Daniela Ingruber pointed the audience towards a quite pro-European mood in the Austrian population by means of survey data and storytelling interviews with the general public but also among regional representatives in Austria. The so-called 'Ibiza-affair' had raised people's and regional deputies' awareness of the necessity of an overall authority serving as a kind of back-up in turbulent times at national level. Ingruber also diagnosed a generational gap regarding Europeanisation among deputies: whereas older interview partners tended to rely on the moral and overarching meaning of the EU, younger respondents focused more on a rational utility-approach in their attitudes towards the EU.

*The conference organisers from Danube University Krems and the Jagiellonian University in Kraków would like to **thank all speakers and participants** for joining the conference and sharing their expertise and knowledge with the audience.*

Contact

For further information on the conference, including presentations and videos from keynote speeches, please visit the conference website:

- <https://www.regioparl.com/parliamentary-voices-on-the-future-of-europe/?lang=en>

For information on the co-organisers, please visit the following websites:

- Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Institute of European Studies: https://www.europeistyka.uj.edu.pl/en_GB/
- Danube University Krems, Department for European Policy and the Study of Democracy: <https://www.donau-uni.ac.at/ded>

For details on the research project REGIOPARL | Regional Parliaments Lab please visit the project website:

- <https://www.regioparl.com/>