

What political actors say about the future of the European Union

The views from national and European parliaments

Summary

Based on an analysis of debates on the future of Europe in 11 national parliaments and the European Parliament between 2015-2021, our study demonstrates three key developments. First, national debates are driven primarily by specific issues relevant for local constituencies and are linked to concrete crises confronting the local populations; national debates are structured by national political conflicts. Second, national debates on the future of Europe focus little on polity aspects of reforms in favour of European integration; partisan voices rarely display coherent and detailed visions of integration. Third, apart from typical ways of narrating the future of Europe in terms of intergovernmental or federal visions, a new and prominent sovereigntist narrative linking former Euro-reject positions with strong Euroscepticism is on the rise in almost all the contexts we studied.

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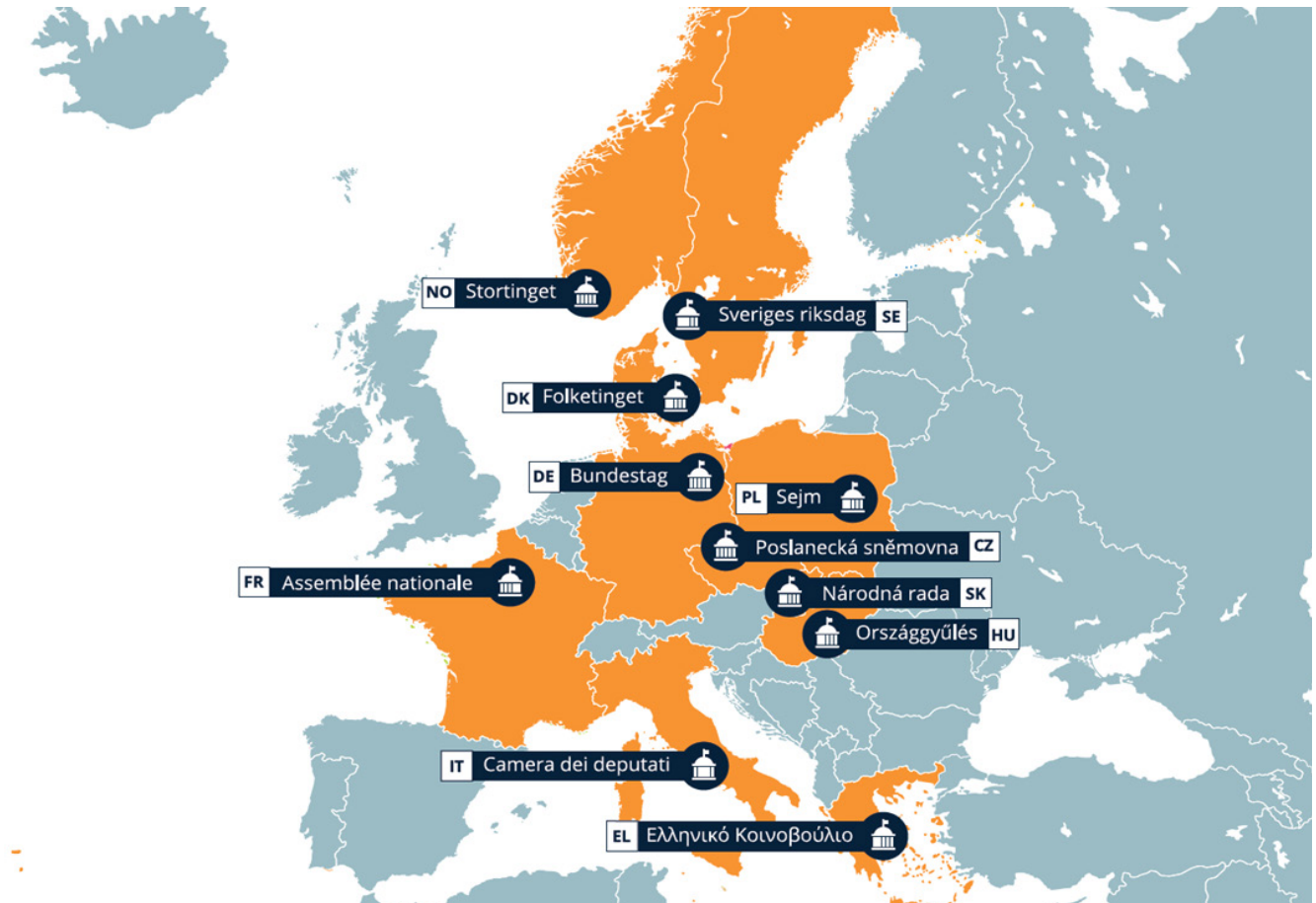
Introduction

The debate on the future of Europe, initiated in 2015 by the *Five Presidents' Report* (European Commission 2015) and the European Commission's White Paper (European Commission 2017), started yet another round of reflection on the *finalité politique* of the European Union. This unfolded in a period that, it seemed, allowed the bloc to overcome mounting crises: financial, migration, and destabilisation in its neighbourhood.

National parliaments became important and creative fora where the debate on the future of Europe was pursued by politicians. Though they are not the most

prominent political institutions in the processes of European integration, national parliaments are indispensable and core arenas for political debate in every liberal democracy. Our research (Góra, Thevenin, and Zielińska 2023), studied debates in 11 national parliaments over a period of seven years (2015–2021), representing a range of European Union (EU) countries (Figure 1) – large and small, western and eastern, and northern and southern – providing an array of perspectives on what the main contentious issues are when it comes to the functioning of EU democracy, and what remedies are offered. In addition, the study includes the debates in the European Parliament, the forum offering a more pan-European perspective on the future of Europe debate.

Figure 1: Analysed national parliaments



Political parties and their representatives in parliaments are the key actors our study focuses on. We assumed that partisan actors would be specifically interested in fostering visions of integration, as well as in discussing the potential malfunctioning of democracy within the EU in national arenas. In many countries, as European integration became increasingly politicised, it was placed at the centre of political bargaining in the domestic arena, impacting the way partisan actors from entire political spectrum envision the future of integration. Across the continent, European integration and its future is contested by populist, Eurosceptic and sovereignist actors who skilfully undermine the constitutive elements of integration.

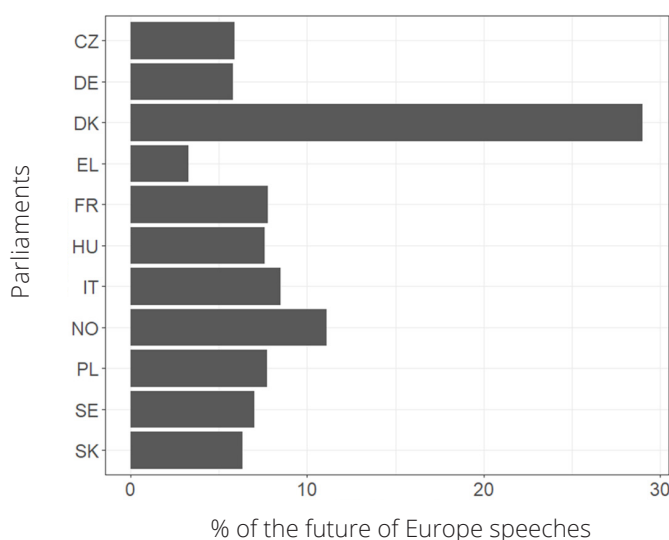
To understand the key trends in the debate across the continent, we analysed 196 plenary debates, of which 71 discussed the future of European integration in broad terms, 60 focused on euro-area governance, and 65 dealt with migration and asylum in the EU. From the European Parliament, 18 debates were selected: six on the future of Europe, six on euro area-related issues and six on migration. As the analysis focused on the political actors, the individual speeches of Members of Parliaments representing different political parties served as the basic unit of analysis. The selected sample consisted of 7,666 speeches, excluding minor interruptions and technical speeches. The sample of references to the future of Europe (which we established as a speech referring to at least one of the key analysed issues) was 3,872 speeches in national parliaments and 761 in the European Parliament. In total, 4,633 future of Europe speeches were analysed, which is 58% of all the speeches.

Key findings

National perspectives matter

As a comparison shows (Figure 2), debates on the future of Europe was similarly intensive in most national parliaments, as measured by the percentage of references to the key analysed aspects of the debate on Europe's future². There were however several triggers in national contexts that led to more intense debates, mostly driven by local concerns. The economic crisis and imposed domestic austerity measures were significant contexts for debates in Greece and to some extent Italy. In Hungary, debate on the future of Europe was rather reactive, with significant debates initiated in response to the migration crisis, which specifically concerned Hungary. Brexit triggered debates in several countries (Czechia, Denmark, Norway). In Italy too, the future of Europe debates were nested within wider debates on crises that strongly affected that country, leading to intense discussions on policies with a high domestic relevance, i.e. migration

Figure 2: Distribution of the Future of Europe speeches in national parliaments (n = 3872 – number of the future of Europe speeches)



and economic policy. In Sweden, debates on the future of Europe were facilitated by an overall sense of urgency caused by the multiple mounting crises confronting the EU. In Poland, increased politicisation (and polarisation) of EU matters on the domestic political scene seemed to trigger the debate. In Slovakia, meanwhile, it was the country's presidency of the Council of the EU that gave a broader context to parliamentarians' interest in the future of Europe. In Norway – a non-EU member with less ability to influence the constitutional makeup and future of the EU – most of the debates were related to the future of the relationship between the EU and Norway – views and opinions on the EEA deal – rather than the future of the EU itself. Similarly to other countries, proposals on the future of the EU in Norway often emerged in the context of other more specific topics, including social issues, transportation and migration.

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When delving into the orientations of politicians involved in the selected debates, our data showed that conservative and right-wing politicians were very active during debates related to European affairs. In light of the literature, which stresses the increased involvement of Eurosceptic, nationalist and/or populist actors in debating European integration, we also observed across national parliaments frequent involvement in the debates of actors sceptical towards European integration (the strength of their disapproval of the EU varying, depending on the national context and over time).

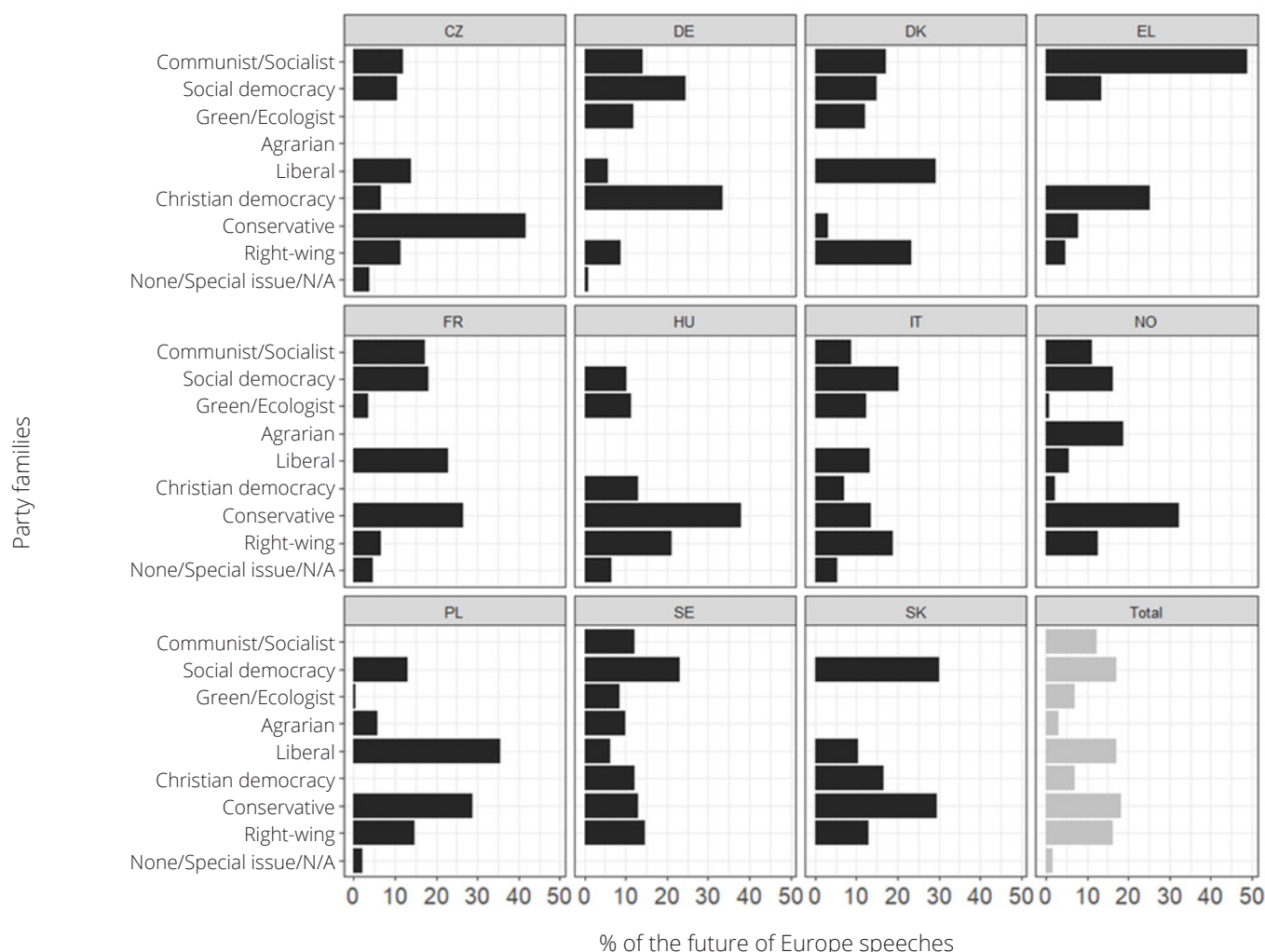
EU institutional reforms are less debated

The discussion on EU institutional make-up and reforms remained in the background of the broader discussion on Europe's future in all analysed parliaments, and constituted only a fraction of the future of Europe debates. Overall, institutional reform was mentioned in approximately 11.5% of the future of Europe speeches. Some variation in demand for such reforms was noted. While some parliaments barely discussed institutional reform (i.e. Greece, Poland and Sweden), calls for institutional reform exceeded 15% of the future of Europe speeches in France, Norway and Slovakia. Requests for EU institutional reform were most frequent in speeches from parties belonging to the liberal and conservative families (over 2% of speeches). Right-wing parties were also keen to demand reform. Our results suggest that institutional reform was very often brought up by majority (or dominant) parties (for instance by the social democrats or liberals in France, but by conservatives in Hungary).

The precise claims varied depending on party families. Maintaining the institutional *status quo* was by far the most-debated request expressed both by proponents of European integration and Eurosceptic actors (Figure 4). It was notably prominent in Italy, Norway and Slovakia, and was strongly advocated for in Germany. Furthermore, our data shows conservatives advocated for keeping *status quo* most (over 40% of requests), being unwilling to further develop the EU, but also unwilling – or unable, depending on their position within the parliament as well as the national context – to reduce its current institutional capacities.

The second most frequently debated reform was the claim for a stronger role for national parliaments within the EU institutional setup.

Figure 3: Frequency of the future of Europe speeches by party family and by national parliament (n= 3872 – number of the future of Europe speeches)



This reform proposal was central for the vast majority of national parliaments, and was especially discussed in Germany, France, Hungary, Poland and Sweden. Although raised by all party families, it was most frequently been advocated by conservative and right-wing parties, which wish to keep a close eye on EU affairs. More national parliament oversight, as discussed in the theoretical section, was also seen as an assurance of sovereignty. Implementation of the direct democracy instruments, including referendums and consultations, was particularly discussed in the French and Danish parliaments. In France, liberal parties mostly discussed and defended

this development in response to President Macron's call for EU-wide public consultations. In Denmark, right-wing actors requested direct democracy instruments. Mirroring Danish domestic politics, which favours direct democracy instruments, several political actors asked for national referendums on EU affairs, especially on Danish opt-outs.

Overall, actual reform of EU institutions was not central to parliamentary debates on the future of Europe. Yet our research demonstrates that the conflict between strengthening and weakening EU institutions clearly follows a pro-versus anti-EU integration divide.

No consistent narratives for the future?

Focused on parliamentary discourse, our study suggests existence of three key narratives on European democracy based on (1) intergovernmental, (2) federal or (3) regional-cosmopolitan vision (Fossum, 2021). These narratives are not yet fixed and are subject to modifications depending on the context in which political actors operate and their ideological position, as well as their stances on European integration. In order to dissect these in each context we specifically focused on what political actors in national parliaments raised as the most pertinent issues in their discussions on how to reconfigure the EU to make it more democratic.

Interestingly, our research shows that political actors predominantly saw the EU in either intergovernmental or federal terms. The cosmopolitan-regional narrative, i.e. stressing the open-ended global and cosmopolitan orientations of the EU, was the least often detected in political discourses across the EU. Some elements of that narrative – usually characterised by progressive Green-Alternative-Libertarian movements – were detected, for instance, in the German Green party.

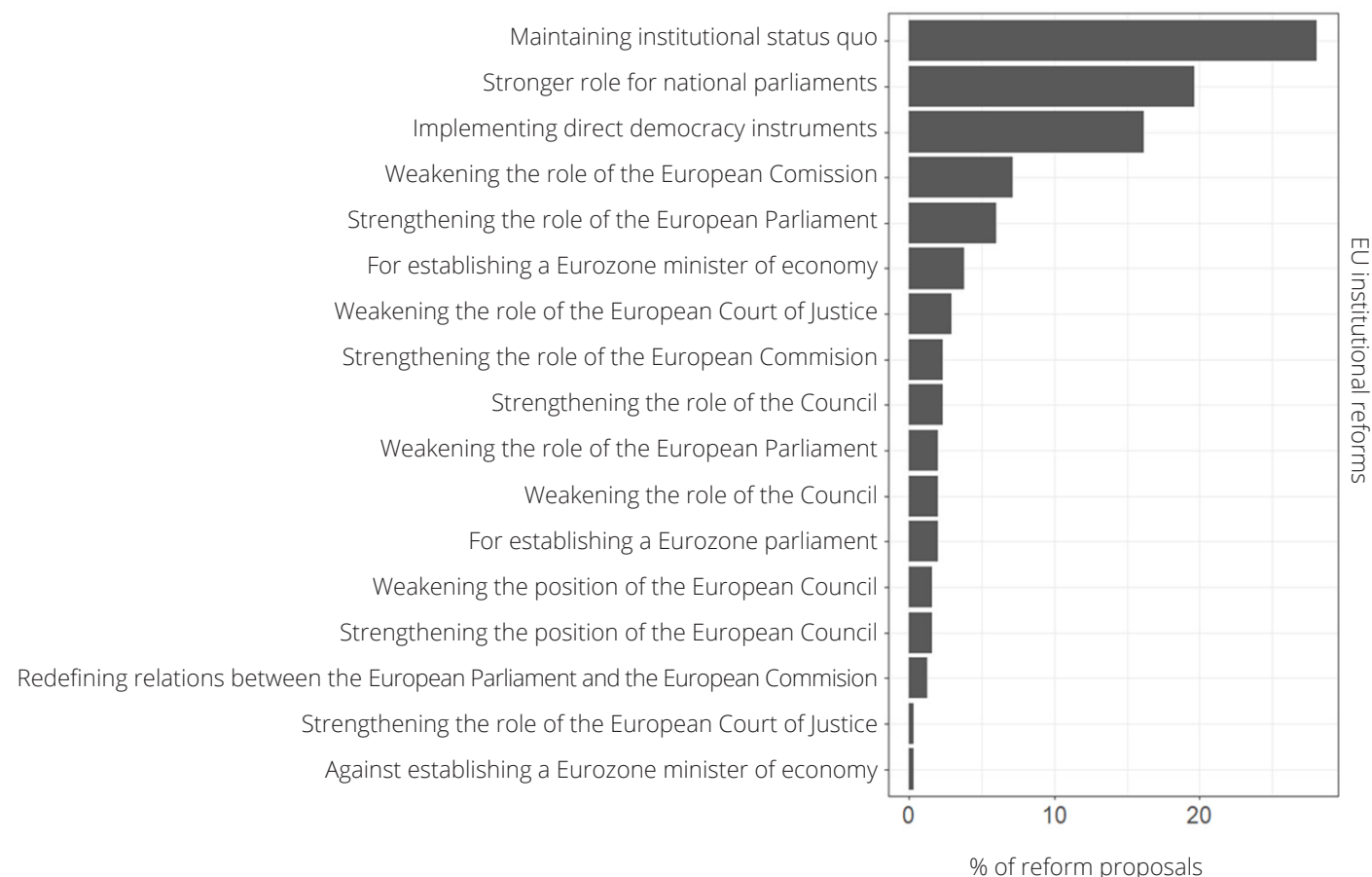
Our second observation is that there was a significant degree of inconsistency in the detected narratives. Many political parties opted on a general level for one narrative, but simultaneously when debating specific policies and necessary instruments, they contradicted the building blocks of their own preferred vision. A good illustration is the German CDU/CSU. Despite promoting the intergovernmental middle ground with strong control vested in the national parliament, the same actors suggested more federal solutions to the refugee crisis. All in all, the way political actors think

about the future is neither consistent nor very detailed and thought through. Analysis of the intergovernmental and federal narratives shows that political actors nuanced the visions they promoted and distinctive subversions have emerged recently. This was mostly in response to domestic triggers and demands.

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The main difference between the intergovernmental variations lies in the extent and degree of competences and capacity given to the EU level, and the specific competences of EU institutions. While some EU competences and capacity, especially held by intergovernmental institutions, are seen as desirable in the intergovernmental narrative, the sovereignist version of intergovernmentalism advocates for a returning of competences to national institutions, with the exception of some policy areas, in which EU-level action is seen as beneficial, but only when supervised by member states. Sometimes, however, intergovernmental narratives were merged with aspects of federal union, as in the republican version of intergovernmentalism (Bellamy 2019), in which democracy should be secured and should thrive at national level, but democratic legitimacy is required at supranational level. In some national contexts, such mixed versions were also detected (i.e. in Italy or Germany). In sum, intergovernmentalism as a constitutional narrative is supported by traditionally Eurosceptic actors across the researched cases.

Figure 4: Frequency of references to EU institutional reforms (n=545 – number of institutional reform proposals)



It was, however, also stretched by actors who are very critical of European integration in a version of the sovereignist narrative that holds only some elements of the intergovernmental setup. The sovereignist narrative – detected in many national contexts – stresses the sacrosanct character of national sovereignty and cooperation between sovereign states only when considered as a necessity. Democracy is solely vested in nation states, but as the vision is often pursued by populists, they often raise radical notions of democratisation, such as demands for direct democratic instruments. This narrative is also internally contradictory as it demands radical repartition of competences from supranational institutions such as the European Commission, while attempting to maintain the benefits of integration.

In addition, many sovereignist actors strongly expressed condemnation of further federalisation of European integration, such as the French National Rally, whose vision of the future of Europe strongly relies on the protection of national sovereignty and fierce opposition to the vision of a federal Europe. In this regard, their statements were similar to those of Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS).

The federal narrative was clearly visible among mainstream actors in founding countries, most clearly Germany's SPD and France's Renaissance/La République En Marche! (REM). The idea of deepening European integration was clearly promoted by several French political parties, including Macron's REM and the Socialist Party. However, similarly to intergovernmental

narratives, our research demonstrates that the federal constitutional narrative has been subject to variation in terms of the degree of federalism advocated for by Members of Parliaments in different contexts. We see from this perspective two main options: a multi-headed federal-type Union equipped with a distinct institutional structure, resembling a federal state and a de-coupled federal political Union. In the first federal vision, political actors typically demand stronger supranational EU institutions, and develop a fully fledged representative system with the European Parliament as a core institution in which democracy is vested. Usually, this also entails advocating for more EU capacities, but in many contexts it is very policy-dependent. A good illustration is the Italian Democratic Party, which supported federal solutions for the entire Union. The second vision was present primarily in euro-area countries, which focused on creating a federal structure specifically designed to control the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). We refer to this sub-narrative as a de-coupled federal political Union, since it includes requests for specific interinstitutional arrangements for governing the single market and euro area.

- Political actors in many analysed contexts suggest improving the functioning of the EU rather than institutional reforms. Any suggested institutional reform should be better justified, and a clear impact in terms of improved the functioning of the EU should be stressed.
- There is no clear pattern in terms of which constitutional narrative for the EU is prevailing; however, Eurosceptic actors are intensively promoting the sovereignist vision of integration, and it is debated in many analysed contexts, and is gaining popularity. There is a need to enhance pro-EU integration narratives and make them more appealing to broader audiences at the national level.

Key recommendations

- Since national debates are strongly driven and filtered by local perspectives, the governments of EU countries, and the EU central institutions, should improve communication of EU issues to the parliaments.
- The debate on the future of Europe is primarily conducted with a focus on specific and locally relevant EU policies. How specific policy reforms impact the operation of the EU system should be reflected more.

Notes

- 1 With contributions from Dia Anagnostou, Filippa Chatzistavrou, Birthe Einen, Max Heermann, Espen D. H. Olsen, Viliam Ostatnik, Guri Rosén, Max Steuer, Fabian Tigges, Natália Timková, Resul Umit, Janna van Diepen and Tiziano Zgaga.
- 2 The only exception was Denmark, where Members of Parliament are engaged in longer and more interactive debates than in other parliaments. This can be explained by the functioning of the Danish parliament, in which Members of Parliament can add several short comments after their main speech.

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