

# The partisan dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe

Agenda-setting, objectives and influence



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# Preface

The strengthening of European democracy was a central feature of Ursula von der Leyen's 2019 political guidelines for the new European Commission. Amongst several proposals, von der Leyen presented the ambition to involve European citizens in defining the priorities and goals of the union through a Conference on the Future of Europe.

For decades, the issue of democratic solidity and public involvement in EU affairs has been a constant point of discussion. A variety of factors such as the rise of Euroscepticism, the historical difficulties to mobilise voters in European Parliament elections, and the fast-paced and crisis-driven European integration of lately have highlighted the issue of democracy at the EU level.

As organisations of interests and representation, political parties play a central role in mobilising public sentiments and defining these on an EU level. In this research report, political scientists Karl Magnus Johansson and Tapio Raunio investigate the impact of the three biggest European political parties – the European People's Party (PPE), the Party of European Socialists (PES), and the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals for Europe (ALDE) – in shaping the form and content of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

SIEPS has previously analysed the importance of political parties and national parliaments engaging with voters on European matters. With this publication SIEPS aims to contribute to this field of study addressing concerns of legitimacy and democratic deficit in European democracy.

Göran von Sydow  
Director, SIEPS

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# List of abbreviations

AFCO	Committee on Constitutional Affairs
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
ECB	European Central Bank
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
ELF	European Liberal Forum
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
EU	European Union
FEPS	Foundation for European Progressive Studies
ID	Identity and Democracy
IGC	Intergovernmental Conference
LYMEC	European Liberal Youth
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MSF	Multiple streams framework
PES	Party of European Socialists
PSOE	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
S&D	Socialists & Democrats
TEU	Treaty on European Union
VLD	(Open) Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten
WMCES	Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
YES	Young European Socialists

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# Executive summary

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a unique deliberative continent-wide experiment, bringing together citizens across the European Union (EU) to discuss its future. At the same time, the Conference is chaired by EU institutions, with the European Parliament (EP), in particular, considerably more supportive of it than most national governments. While designed as a bottom-up forum for listening to citizens, the Conference thus offers an opportunity for Europarties and their EP groups to both engage with their activists and to shape the agenda and debates of the Conference.

This report examines how successful the three largest political families or Europarties – the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the centre-left Party of European Socialists (PES), the centrist Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and their EP party groups – have been in shaping the agenda and debates of the Conference. The report addresses three main research questions. First, it explores the avenues and strategies through which the Europarties and EP groups have sought to influence the Conference: coalition-building in the Parliament, and links with the Commission, national member parties, and European political foundations that are linked to the Europarties. Second, it analyses the division of labour or balance of power between and within Europarties and their EP groups relating to the Conference. Third, it assesses the priorities of these partisan actors in the Conference. And, more normatively, it discusses whether 'political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union', as outlined in the EU Treaties, through investigating whether the Europarties 'reached out' to the citizens or at least to their own individual members before and during the Conference. Our study therefore increases scholarly understanding of the Conference itself, whilst paying particular attention to the strategies and internal organisation of the Europarties and their EP groups.

The theoretical framework of the report focuses on the importance of agenda-setting in EU politics and on the strategies of Europarties and the EP groups in previous rounds of constitutional reform. The empirical analysis, drawing on interviews and documents, is divided into three parts. The first examines the inter-institutional bargaining in the run-up to the Conference, the second the actions and strategies of the Europarties and the EP groups before and during the Conference, while the third analyses the positions of the supranational partisan actors in the Conference. The interviewees were from the offices of the Europarties and the EP groups, as well as individuals from the Parliament and the political foundations. The interviews were semi-structured and carried out between spring 2020 and early 2022. Through the interviews we examine how the Europarties and the EP groups have attempted to shape the Conference.

Documents consist of position papers, resolutions, press releases, and other material produced by the EU institutions, Europarties, media, and the political foundations. Document analysis in turn enables us to understand the sequencing of the events and whether the position papers of the Europarties and EP groups have influenced the Conference agenda and debates. The report also identifies Europarty politicians and individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who were active and influential in relation to the Conference.

The results show how the Conference, like the EU in general, has an important transnational partisan dimension. Europarties, and particularly the well-resourced EP groups, benefiting from decades of experience of Treaty reforms and inter-institutional bargaining, managed to shape the agenda and also the debates of the Conference. These supranational partisan actors clearly prioritized items related to EU democracy and institutions but displayed less effort in reaching out to the citizens. Inside the Parliament the party groups built large coalitions behind resolutions, with group chairs strongly present in the process. Europarties played a much smaller role, while the political foundations were highly active through organising events and producing background material. Content analysis reveals considerable similarity between the institutional objectives, although differences were also found – for example, regarding transnational lists for EP elections. The concluding section summarises the findings and discusses how our study contributes to an understanding of EU democracy and the role of Europarties and EP groups in shaping the future of Europe.

# 1 Introduction

European integration has an important transnational partisan dimension, which is often overlooked as the governments of the member states get most of the media coverage. The institutions of the European Union (EU) are in turn mainly presented as unitary actors, even though they consist of politicians representing different party families. Indeed, Europarties are most likely unknown organisations even among most activists of their national member parties. This is not surprising. In European Parliament (EP) elections the party groups of the Europarties remain firmly in the background, and Europarties and the EP groups seldom feature in national medias. Europarties and their EP groups are officially independent of each other, but it is nonetheless more realistic to view them as part of the same Europarty organisation. Party groups exist in the Parliament, while Europarties are extra-parliamentary organisations that bring together national parties across the EU to pursue shared political objectives and to field candidates for leading positions in EU institutions, not least the post of Commission President (the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism).

Through their national heads of government, EP groups and Commission portfolios, Europarties are in a powerful position to shape the laws, policies and agenda of the Union. Europarties and their EP groups have also decades of experience from Treaty amendments and inter-institutional bargaining. Given the initially weak powers of the Parliament, in these constitutional processes the Europarties have successfully campaigned in favour of empowering the EP, thereby also consolidating the role of the Europarties in the EU's political regime. The Conference on the Future of Europe represents another opportunity for the Europarties and the EP groups to shape both the direction of integration and the institutional set-up of the Union. Designed as an innovative, bottom-up exercise in deliberative democracy, bringing together citizens across the EU, the start of the Conference was delayed until May 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chaired by the EU institutions and utilising a combination of virtual platforms, national events, citizens' panels and plenaries, by spring 2022 the Conference is expected to reach conclusions and provide guidance on the future of Europe. However, the outcome and impact of the Conference is not clear as most member states remain hesitant about the Conference resulting in Treaty changes.

Examining the Conference and focusing on the three largest Europarties, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the centre-left Party of European Socialists (PES), and the centrist Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), and their EP political groups, our study is guided by three main research questions. First, it explores the various avenues and strategies through which the Europarties and EP groups have sought to influence the Conference:

coalition-building in the Parliament, and links with the Commission, national member parties, and European political foundations that are linked to the Europarties. Second, it analyses the division of labour or balance of power between and within Europarties and their EP groups regarding the Conference. Third, it examines the priorities of these supranational partisan actors in the Conference. And, on a more normative level, it examines whether 'political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union', as outlined in the EU Treaties,<sup>1</sup> through investigating whether the Europarties 'reached out' to the citizens or at least to their own individual members before and during the Conference. Our study therefore increases scholarly understanding of the Conference itself, whilst paying particular attention to the strategies and internal organisation of the Europarties and their EP groups.

The theoretical framework is divided into two parts. The next section focuses on the importance of agenda-setting in EU politics, while the subsequent section examines the strategies of Europarties and the EP in previous rounds of constitutional reform. The empirical section, drawing on interviews and documents and partly on participant observation through the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), is divided into three parts. The first examines inter-institutional bargaining in the run-up to the Conference, the second the behaviour and strategies of the Europarties and the EP groups before and during the Conference, while the third analyses the positions of the supranational partisan actors regarding the Conference. The interviewees were from the offices of the Europarties and the EP groups, as well as individuals from the Parliament and the political foundations. The interviews were semi-structured and carried out between spring 2020 and early 2022. Through the interviews we uncover how the Europarties and the EP groups have attempted to shape the Conference. Documents consist of position papers, resolutions, press releases, and other material produced by the EU institutions, Europarties, media and the political foundations. Document analysis in turn enables us to understand the sequencing of the events and whether the position papers of the Europarties and EP groups have influenced the Conference agenda and debates. The report also identifies Europarty politicians and individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who were active and influential in relation to the Conference. The concluding section summarises the findings and reflects on how our study contributes to understanding of EU democracy and the role of Europarties and EP groups in shaping the future of Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 10(4), Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union.

## 2 Agenda-setting in EU politics

Agenda-setting is a fundamentally important stage of any decision-making process. Starting with Cobb and Elder (1971), academic research has produced a number of different typologies and approaches to studying agenda-setting. The literature often identifies three types of agendas: the public agenda includes issues that citizens find salient; the media agenda consists of issues that are covered by the media; and the political agenda includes issues that policymakers deal with. According to the so-called ‘multiple streams framework’ (MSF) model (Kingdon 1984; Ackrill et al. 2013; Béland and Howlett 2016), policymaking processes consist of three streams: the problem stream consists of problem perceptions among policymakers; the solution stream consists of proposals for political decisions; and the politics stream consists of political activities and developments like lobby campaigns, or the political context in which decision-making occurs. The links between the three streams are made by issue entrepreneurs, individuals or organisations that ‘are willing to invest their time and energy in promoting a particular issue’ (Elder and Cobb 1984: 121). And when these three streams meet, a ‘policy window’ opens and the issue moves to the agenda of decision-makers. Within MSF, ‘the analytical task is to specify the dynamic and complex interactions that generate specific policy outcomes’ (Ackrill et al. 2013: 872–873), but particularly in complex settings such as the EU, this can be inherently difficult. Hence, we focus on how and to what extent Europarties and their EP political groups overall shape the agenda and debates of the Conference.

As for the origins of issues on the agenda, they can come from the external environment or from the political actors themselves (Mansbach and Vasquez 1981). The former approach, identified with the international relations literature, sees political issues arising from the international environment. The latter category in turn includes issues that arise from the interests of the actual stakeholders, the political institutions and actors within them. As argued by Princen (2007, 2009), in EU governance the latter approach is normally more appropriate for understanding the sources of items on the agenda of the EU institutions, although major external developments, such as terrorist attacks, refugee crises or climate change can obviously feature high on the EU agenda. National governments or interest groups try to move issues to the Brussels agenda, and European-level actors have their own strong reasons for having matters debated in EU institutions.

Agenda-setting success is often influenced by how problems are framed. Issue entrepreneurs can refer to broadly shared fundamental values and ‘big words’ (e.g. human rights, sustainable development, or democracy), or use an alternative

strategy of ‘small steps’, whereby support is gradually built up through more low-key strategies, including behind-the-scenes processes and de-politicisation of issues (Princen 2011). A related tactic is issue bundling, or what in MSF terminology is called coupling: ‘Apart from skills and resources, entrepreneurs pursue strategies to join together problems and policies into attractive packages, which are then “sold” to receptive policy-makers’ (Ackrill et al. 2013: 873). Considering the ‘distance’ between Brussels and average citizens, ‘agenda-setting strategies in the EU will be focused more exclusively on dynamics that take place within policy communities than on reaching out to larger audiences outside of those communities’ (Princen 2011: 940). And, as Princen also points out, broadening the scope of participation entails the risk of creating controversy and opposition. Regarding the Conference, proposals such as transnational lists for EP elections are sure not to please the more Eurosceptical politicians.

Another key dimension concerns the ‘venue’ (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), that is, where and by whom the issue is debated. Princen (2011) distinguishes between venue shopping and venue modification. The former

occurs when agenda-setters seek out a venue (among those available to them) that is most receptive to their cause. Within the EU, venue shopping may occur between EU institutions (horizontal venue shopping) and between the different ‘levels’ in the multilevel system that the EU forms part of (vertical venue shopping). (Princen 2011: 931)

Venue shopping occurs among already existing venues, whereas venue modification means that ‘if a suitable venue is not available, actors may sometimes also be able to modify the range of available venues in order to create one that is better suited to their purposes’. (Princen 2011: 933) For example, in the EU environmental activists may prefer that environmental policies are on the agenda of actors that are likely to have more pro-environment positions. However, the equation is of course not that simple given the linkages between environment and other policy sectors, and as achieving environment-friendly outcomes requires the support of a broad range of actors – in the case of Treaty change unanimity between the member states. As explained below, for the Conference on the Future of Europe, the relevant question is the balance between the supranational (EP, Commission) and more intergovernmental (Council, European Council) institutions.

Modern Europe is a multilevel polity that offers political actors various access points for influencing decision-making. The Commission enjoys the monopoly of legislative initiative, and more broadly as the ‘engine of integration’ it is commonly perceived as having a central role in setting the agenda in Brussels (e.g. Pollack 1997; Hartlapp et al. 2014; Koop et al. 2022). Sometimes external shocks or unexpected events can have a strong impact on agendas, as has happened recently with the euro crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit and COVID-19.

Pollack (1997) distinguished between formal and informal agenda-setters in EU governance. The former includes the ‘big’ institutions like the Commission and the Parliament, whereas the latter are issue entrepreneurs. Europarties in a sense belong to both categories: they are independent civil society organisations, but strongly present in EU institutions. Key individuals inside Europarties and EP groups are thus both policymakers and issue entrepreneurs. Overall, there is a broad range of actors from national and EU institutions to lobbyists and interest groups to public opinion that influence which issues receive the attention of EU decision-makers (e.g. Tallberg 2003; Daviter 2007; Princen 2007, 2009, 2011; Ackrill et al. 2013). As national governments and EU institutions consist of party politicians, it is obvious that, essentially, all major integration milestones as well as normal EU laws and policies have been shaped by political ideologies and the programmes and positions of political parties.

The agenda-setting approach is thus helpful in understanding the emergence and framing of issues on the agenda of decision-makers. However, it usually emphasises positive power and neglects negative power, that is the power to prevent other actors from devoting attention to specific issues. While we in this report focus on the priorities of the Europarties and EP groups, it is equally relevant to acknowledge issues and solutions not promoted by these supranational partisan actors.

### 3 Europarties and EP groups, constitutional reforms, and the benefit of experience

Europarties have clearly become more important in the EU's political system. Existing research has mainly analysed their organisational development (e.g. Delwit et al. 2004; Gagatsek 2008, 2009; Timus and Lightfoot 2014), or constitutionalisation and financial regulation (e.g. Johansson and Raunio 2005; Wolfs 2019; Norman and Wolfs 2021). Europarties have been recognised in the EU Treaties since the 1990s, which along with the funding available – since 2004 the Europarties have been allocated money from the EU's budget – has triggered the establishment of several new Europarties. We concentrate in this study on the three largest and traditionally most influential European party families comprising the centre-right (conservatives and Christian Democrats) EPP, the centre-left PES, and the liberal ALDE. EPP was already established in 1976, while the pre-existing confederations of liberal and socialist parties, also founded in the mid-1970s, were turned into actual Europarties in the early 1990s in the context of the inclusion of the 'party article' in the Maastricht Treaty.

Organisationally, the Europarties are quite similar. Their highest decision-making body is the congress. Other organs include the bureau (or council) and the presidency. Majority voting can be used, but Europarties essentially aim at unanimous decisions. Indeed, as *parties of parties*, Europarties primarily serve as arenas for their member parties and remain constrained in their efforts to be actors in their own right. However, the introduction of public funding of Europarties from the EU budget has reduced their financial dependence on national member parties. But it is still more realistic to describe Europarties as federations of national parties or as party networks, at least when comparing them with the often centralised and hierarchical parties found at the national level. At the same time, it is evident that Europarties are, in the early twenty-first century, much more institutionalised and mature organisations, both in terms of their identity and structures, than the looser transnational parties or confederations that emerged in Europe in the 1970s.

Europarties fulfil a coordinating function: they promote the sharing and exchange of information, knowledge and experience, and they play an important role in facilitating and institutionalising networks (Johansson and Raunio 2021). The major Europarties are strongly present in EU institutions, notably the EP and the Commission, and they have active links to interest groups. Europarties



also negotiate, both internally and with each other, key EU appointments, such as the Presidents of the Commission, the Parliament, and the European Council. In particular, in the 2014 and 2019 EP elections the Europarties put forward their own lead candidates, *Spitzenkandidaten*, for the Commission President. Furthermore, they work out political or action programmes for their corresponding party groups, and manifestos for EP elections. They adopt common policies in a broad range of topics, often through regular or ad hoc working parties that cover major policy areas as well as party-related activities like campaign management. Moreover, Europarties prepare the ground for future enlargements by integrating interests from the prospective member states (e.g. Ibenskas 2020). Through their membership in the Europarties, parties from the applicant countries engage in partisan cooperation that is important in nurturing wider, pan-European political allegiances. In this connection, Europarties serve as vehicles for the diffusion of democratic values.

However, existing research grapples with the question of impact. Do Europarties matter? What influence do Europarties really have? Most of the existing research has focused on Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs) negotiating Treaty reforms. Here the evidence is somewhat mixed, but points to the direction of Europarties and their EP groups wielding, under the right circumstances, even decisive influence in the IGCs and the European Council summits. Their influence is conditional, with the effectiveness of the Europarties largely depending on the capacity to mobilise ‘their’ heads of national governments for the party cause (Johansson 2016, 2017; see also Van Hecke 2010). Pre-European Council summit meetings among government/party leaders are a central aspect of this mobilisation process, but their significance appears to vary over time and across party families. Europarties have no formal powers to take decisions binding their heads of government, implying thus that successful *ex ante* policy coordination between national member parties is essential for Europarties to achieve their goals in the European Council. Obviously, the relative bargaining weight of individual Europarties is stronger when they are more strongly represented in the European Council (Hix and Lord 1997; Johansson 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2016, 2017; Lightfoot 2005; Tallberg and Johansson 2008).

It can also be difficult to draw a line between influence exerted by Europarties and corresponding EP party groups, especially as the literature has largely neglected the impact of the latter (Johansson 2020). Exploring the role of the EPP Group in the process of constitutionalising the EU since the 1980s, Johansson (2020: 129) concluded that the EPP Group mostly emerges as an influential player, even if not always a unitary actor.<sup>2</sup> He underlined the strategic importance of party networks within and around the European Council that facilitated influence over bargaining outcomes, whilst at the same time reminding that party group

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<sup>2</sup> The report uses the abbreviation EPP Group even for the period (1999–2009) when the group was officially called the European People’s Party and European Democrats (EPP-ED).

influence is nonetheless conditional on support from national governments. Johansson also showed that in EPP, the party group and the actual Europarty seemed very much in sync throughout the Treaty reform processes, and that the EPP has developed its own strategies and networks over the decades – experience that clearly facilitates policy influence. Informal, even personal, partisan links can be crucial. For example, there is ample evidence that individuals with privileged access to the German Christian Democratic chancellor and her/his assistants have been key players within EPP. Moreover, power asymmetries inside the party group cannot be avoided, with some individual MEPs and national delegations carrying more political weight than others.

An example of the partisan dimension is provided by the 2002–2003 Convention on the Future of Europe, which resulted in the Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe – and subsequently the Lisbon Treaty. It amply demonstrated how MEPs gained from ‘playing at home’ (Priestley 2008: 37), on their home turf. It is clear the partisan dimension played an important role throughout the Convention, not least during the final stages. The bigger political families, and especially the well-organised EPP and centrist liberals, built bridges between MEPs and national MPs (Norman 2003: 324–325; see also Johansson 2003). The partisan framework became a crucial focal point. More specifically, the EPP political family organised itself into the EPP Convention Group and managed to exert a significant influence in the Convention through its members and delegation leaders (Johansson 2020: 115–122; see also Van Hecke 2012). The EPP was seemingly the most influential political family during the Convention. But the EPP Group was the real powerhouse, providing the infrastructure, the personnel and other resources. This helps explain the effectiveness of the EPP Group in the Convention.

Europarties have actually emerged from their EP party groups. As stated in the introductory section, Europarties and EP groups are officially independent of each other, but, in reality, they should be viewed as operating within the same Europarty organisation. This applies particularly to the three main Europarties analysed in this report. There is substantial overlap in terms of national parties. Measuring the percentage of MEPs belonging to the EP party groups that were also members of a national party belonging to the corresponding Europarty, in the 2009–2014 and 2014–2019 legislative terms, the overlap was around 90% or above in EPP and PES while somewhat lower in ALDE. EP groups are also strongly present in the various decision-making bodies of the Europarties. While the central offices of the Europarties have grown in size over the decades, the EP groups have substantially stronger resources than the respective Europarties, both in terms of funding and staff. (For details, see Calossi and Cicchi 2019; Calossi 2014.)

The EP party system has throughout the history of the Parliament been in practice dominated by the ‘grand coalition’ of EPP and PES (the official group

name has been Socialists & Democrats, S&D, after the 2009 elections), with the liberal group (called Renew Europe after the 2019 elections when it formed a pact with the *La République En Marche!*, the party established by French President Emmanuel Macron) also present in the chamber since the 1950s (Hix et al. 2007). EPP has been the largest party group since the 1999 elections. In November 2021, EPP controlled 179 seats, the S&D 146, and Renew Europe 98 (out of a total of 705 seats). In fact, since the 2019 elections the two largest groups, for the first time, control less than half of the seats in the chamber – a situation which should increase the bargaining weight of the smaller party groups.

While the primary decision rule in EP is simple majority, for certain issues (mainly budget amendments and second-reading legislative amendments adopted under the co-decision procedure), the Parliament needs absolute majorities (50% plus one MEP). This absolute majority requirement has facilitated cooperation between the EPP and S&D, which between them controlled around two-thirds of the seats until the 2014 elections. Cooperation between EPP and S&D is also influenced by inter-institutional considerations, because the Parliament has needed to moderate its resolutions in order to get its amendments accepted by the Council and the Commission (Kreppel 2002). And when the two large groups have failed to agree, the numerically much smaller liberal group, situated ideologically between the EPP and S&D, has often been in a pivotal position in forming winning coalitions in the chamber. Pragmatic cooperation between the centrist groups means that most issues are essentially precooked at the committee stage – thus paving the way for plenary votes adopted by ‘supermajorities’, or what Bowler and McElroy (2015) have called ‘hurrah votes’.

The main EP party groups are thus definitely institutionalised, mature organisations. They have decades of experience of building unitary group positions, of bargaining with each other in order to form winning coalitions, and of interacting with the Commission and other European-level actors. Equally important in terms of our study is the ‘underdog’ position of the Parliament itself. Initially a purely consultative body with members seconded from national parliaments, the EP is today vested with significant legislative, control and budgetary powers. In addition, MEPs have proven remarkably inventive in pushing for more powers between IGCs, adopting practices that have over time become the established course of action (Héritier et al. 2019). In these inter-institutional battles, the leading figures in the Parliament – notably party group chairs – have been strongly present, thereby signalling that the issue is important for the Parliament and that there is broad support in the chamber for the reform. This stands in contrast to normal legislative processes, where rapporteurs and MEPs with relevant policy expertise are influential within the party groups and in the Parliament as a whole. As institutional questions feature strongly on the agenda of the Conference, the EP and its party groups thus have their own interests at stake.

The same party-political situation extends to the Commission, where EPP, PES, and ALDE have controlled most and occasionally even all portfolios since the 1950s. In the current Commission appointed in late 2019 and led by Ursula von der Leyen (EPP), EPP has 10, PES 9, and ALDE 5 Commissioners (having thus 24 out of 27 positions). Informal ties are also important, with for example, both the EPP's party group and its Europarty having regular dinners and other modes of contact with the Commission (Bardi 2020). Moreover, Europarties can seek to influence agenda-setting more indirectly via interest groups, think tanks, and other actors close to them – and indeed, these same actors can in turn lobby the Europarties. Of specific interest are political foundations, organisations funded from the EU budget and affiliated with a Europarty that should contribute to debates about both public policy issues and the broader process of European integration. The political foundations mainly do this through organising various events, such as seminars and conferences, their publications, and through maintaining active networks with their national member foundations, each other, and of course with the Europarties and their EP party groups. The respective foundations have very close links with their Europarties, helping them in drafting manifestos, resolutions, as well as more long-term strategies and programmes (Bardi et al. 2014; Gagatsek and Van Hecke 2014). As of 2021, EPP has the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (WMCES), PES the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), and ALDE the European Liberal Forum (ELF). Given the quite limited resources of Europarties, even if their offices have grown considerably in recent decades, the political foundations should improve the policymaking capacity of Europarties, not least in terms of offering new ideas and perspectives.

Europarties are European-level actors offering a home, and networks, for like-minded national member parties (Johansson and Raunio 2021). Overall, Europarties are easily perceived as being part of the 'Brussels bubble' that should do more to reach out to civil society and citizens (Van Hecke et al. 2018). Europarties have introduced membership for individuals, but in her pioneering study, Hertner (2019) showed that the Europarties had only very small numbers of individual members, with national member parties often against giving individual members stronger participation rights. Hertner thus argued that Europarties should empower their grassroots activists through granting them real participatory opportunities. According to her study, ALDE and PES had granted individual members at least some say in decision-making and/or drafting of policies, whereas in EPP individual members enjoyed essentially no rights at all. Europarties face the challenge of scale, but the Conference on the Future of Europe would seem a good opportunity for involving the rank-and-file: it is, at least according to the official declarations and documents, dedicated to listening to Europeans, not least through setting up citizens' panels and the multilingual digital platform. Moreover, Europarties more than their EP groups have the necessary networks of member parties, political foundations and other affiliated organisations that are also listed on their websites.

Before proceeding to our empirical analysis, it is worth reminding that the Europarties and their EP groups are not new to this game. Instead, as argued above, they are used to building networks and coalitions in order to gain new powers and rights in IGCs and other inter-institutional bargaining rounds. They have a long-standing interest towards the future development of EU democracy and institutional questions, advocating a stronger role for the supranational institutions whilst arguing in favour of reforms – such as the lead candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*) procedure or transnational lists for European elections (e.g. Costa 2021) – that directly deal with Europarties themselves. Indeed, champions of the role of Europarties consistently emphasise the contribution Europarties make to the further democratisation of the Union. Temporal dimension and experience are also identified in agenda-setting and the MSF:

Importantly, what emerges as a potential solution in response to the opening of a policy window is the result of prior advocacy for ideas and proposals by entrepreneurs, in particular their skill, persistence and resources in pushing particular project. For MSF applications to the EU, it is their ability to sell these ideas to policy makers in response to policy windows – and thereby couple the politics, problems and policy streams – that explains whether windows of policy opportunity actually result in policy change. (Ackrill et al. 2013: 880)

This prior advocacy and experience should work in favour of Europarties and their EP groups.

Given the explorative nature of our research design, we do not use explicit hypotheses but have formulated a series of expectations that structure our empirical analysis. First, we expect that the European-level partisan actors specifically campaigned for the ‘conference format’ as opposed to more intergovernmental approaches to running the Conference. The ‘conference format’ is by design more supranational, giving a strong role for the citizens and the plenary – a familiar forum for parliamentarians. Regarding division of labour between the Europarties and their EP groups, the expectation is that the latter are more centrally involved in the Conference than their extra-parliamentary Europarties. The EP groups are more ‘present’ in the EU policy process, have considerable experience of direct inter-institutional bargaining, and also have substantially stronger resources. Moreover, the Conference is not designed as a formal IGC resulting in Treaty changes. Regarding coalition-building, we expect to see active collaboration between the individual Europarties and/or their EP groups, as they clearly have common objectives in the Conference. The EP party groups understand that parliamentary unity should help the Parliament in reaching its goals. Therefore, most plenary votes should be adopted by large majorities that extend beyond the ‘grand coalition’ of EPP and S&D. In terms of the balance of power within the party groups, we expect the group chairs to be the dominant or at least the most visible actors. To increase the chances of the Parliament’s voice being heard, party group chairs should take an active role in

guiding the issues through the Parliament and in expressing the positions of the EP and the political groups. As for the position papers, we expect to find strong convergence between the objectives of the three Europarties and their EP groups regarding institutions and EU democracy in the Conference.

## 4 Empirical analysis

The empirical section is divided into three parts. The first one examines inter-institutional bargaining about the format and agenda of the Conference. The second focuses on the strategies and behaviour of the Europarties and their EP groups, starting with coalition-building in the Parliament and then exploring how the political families organised individually and coordinated their actions regarding the ‘future of Europe’. The final part analyses the positions of the three Europarties and their EP groups in institutional matters. The whole empirical section should be viewed as part of the agenda-setting phase: we cover the build-up to the Conference and its operation until the end of 2021, and, as will be shown, the political families engaged throughout in a consistent effort to advance their goals.

### 4.1 Shaping the agenda and format of the Conference

The 2010s was a turbulent decade for the EU, with both the euro crisis and the refugee crisis revealing strong tensions between the member states and different political families, with particularly the populist and radical right parties benefiting from the increased politicisation of integration. Brexit in turn fuelled concerns about the rise of Eurosceptical movements and the democratic legitimacy of integration. In the wake of the Brexit vote several key figures – notably the French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker – gave high-profile speeches that included initiatives for debates about the future of integration. The Commission proposed five scenarios for the future of Europe in March 2017, and this was crucial in triggering the subsequent reflections and concrete initiatives for reforming the EU.<sup>3</sup> The Juncker Commission also made active use of Citizens’ Dialogues, first initiated by the Commission in 2012.<sup>4</sup> In September 2017, President Macron initiated citizens’ consultations that were held in most member states during 2018.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025. European Commission, COM(2017)2025, 1.3.2017.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Citizens’ dialogues and citizens’ consultations. Key conclusions, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/get-involved/citizens-dialogues\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/get-involved/citizens-dialogues_en); 30.4.2019.

<sup>5</sup> President Macron gives speech on new initiative for Europe, Office of the President of the French Republic, 26.9.2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique>

The Parliament had continued its tradition of adopting resolutions in favour of both deeper integration and of increasing its own powers.<sup>6</sup> Antonio Tajani, the EP President, invited the heads of state or government of EU countries to give their visions on the Future of Europe in the EP plenaries.<sup>7</sup> Building on these plenary debates with national leaders, in February 2019 the Parliament outlined its vision and priorities for the future of Europe.<sup>8</sup> S&D MEP and author of the Parliament's report Ramón Jáuregui Atondo said:

In May, EU Presidents and Prime Ministers will gather in Sibiu to set a new course for the EU. This report is the Parliament's contribution to this debate on the future of Europe. In the time of Brexit and renewed nationalism across Europe, it is vital to find renewed energy to further the European project. [...] Half a century after the Treaty of Rome, we need to find a renewed energy and purpose for our Union.

In the report, the Parliament exhibited once again strongly pro-integrationist goals, including commitment to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and 'necessary reforms of the Eurozone, with shared competence over fiscal and economic policies, completion of the monetary union, and a dedicated Eurozone budget'.

In March 2019 President Macron, in an 'open letter' addressed to all Europeans, specifically called for the establishment of a 'Conference for Europe' that should proceed 'without taboos' and be based on wide-ranging consultation with citizens and civil society actors.<sup>9</sup> The European Council in May adopted the Sibiu Declaration, outlining ten commitments for the future of Europe.<sup>10</sup> MEPs surely felt relieved when turnout increased in the EP elections held the

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<sup>6</sup> See for example 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)), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0049\\_EN.html?redirect](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0049_EN.html?redirect); 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)), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0048\\_EN.html?redirect](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0048_EN.html?redirect)

<sup>7</sup> The Future of Europe debates in the European Parliament, 2018–2019: A synthesis of speeches by EU Heads of State or Government, In-Depth Analysis, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 637.948 – May 2019.

<sup>8</sup> European Parliament outlines its priorities for the future of Europe, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/european-parliament-outlines-its-priorities-future-europe>, 13.2.2019; European Parliament resolution of 13 February 2019 on the state of the debate on the future of Europe (2018/2094(INI)), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0098\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0098_EN.html)

<sup>9</sup> «Pour une Renaissance européenne» : la lettre d'Emmanuel Macron aux Européens, <http://www.leparisien.fr/politique/pour-une-rennaissance-europeenne-la-lettre-d-emmanuel-macron-aux-europeens-04-03-2019-8024766.php#xtor=AD-1481423553>, 4.3.2019.

<sup>10</sup> The Sibiu Declaration, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/05/09/the-sibiu-declaration/>, European Council, 9.5.2019.



same month quite significantly to just over 50% and the predicted rise in the Eurosceptical vote did not materialise. The election campaigns across the EU also saw polarisation or contestation regarding various issues, not least climate change (De Sio et al. 2019). In terms of agenda-setting, there was thus clearly in the aftermath of the crises a ‘policy window’ open for debates about engaging with citizens and improving the democratic credentials of the EU. And in terms of the origins of the agenda items, we note the influence of both the international environment and the interests of the actual stakeholders, the EU institutions and actors within them.

The Parliament did not appreciate the European Council held in early July 2019 ignoring the *Spitzenkandidaten* process when choosing the candidate for the Commission president. But the candidate, Ursula von der Leyen, needed the majority of MEPs behind her. Thus, under the heading ‘A new push for European democracy’ in the guidelines for her Commission, von der Leyen expressed her commitment to a Conference on the Future of Europe:

I want citizens to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in 2020 and run for two years. The Conference should bring together citizens, including a significant role for young people, civil society, and European institutions as equal partners. The Conference should be well prepared with a clear scope and clear objectives, agreed between the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. I am ready to follow up on what is agreed, including by legislative action if appropriate. I am also open to Treaty change. Should there be a Member of the European Parliament put forward to chair the Conference, I will fully support this idea.<sup>11</sup>

The same guidelines stated that the Conference should address both the *Spitzenkandidaten* system and the introduction of transnational lists in EP elections. Not surprisingly, both items have long been on the agenda of both the Europarties and the Parliament. In particular, the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism has been defended by referring to fundamental values such as democracy and citizen participation. Von der Leyen further specified her thoughts on the Conference in the ‘mission letter’ to Dubravka Šuica, at that point the vice-president-designate for Democracy and Demography.<sup>12</sup> Šuica, a former MEP and vice-chair of the EPP Group, is responsible for dealing with the Conference in the Commission.

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<sup>11</sup> Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20190716RES57231/20190716RES57231.pdf>, 16.7.2019.

<sup>12</sup> Ursula von der Leyen, President-elect of the European Commission, Mission letter, Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President-designate for Democracy and Demography, Brussels, 10.9.2019.

In subsequent position papers we can detect elements of both issue framing and venue shopping. On 26 November 2019, France and Germany published a paper that could be interpreted as trying to steer the process in a more intergovernmental direction and as an attempt to keep the Conference more focused on policies instead of institutional questions.<sup>13</sup> However, the joint contribution from France and Germany simultaneously gave a ‘strong push’ for the Conference (Fabbrini 2019: 6; Fabbrini 2021: 2), offering legitimacy and highest-level political support for the project amidst some more lukewarm receptions in member state capitals – and of course it was Macron who had initiated the whole Conference with his ‘open letter’. The European Council of December 2019 gave a mission to the Croatian Presidency to prepare the Council position, underlining the need to focus on policies instead of institutional questions.<sup>14</sup> Also various interest groups intervened. For example, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) called for the inclusion of social and labour market issues on the agenda.<sup>15</sup>

The Parliament and its main party groups had actively campaigned for the ‘conference format’, both in the various documents, including the final EP resolution adopted on 15 January 2020, and in their informal interactions with the Commission and other actors (see below section 4.2). In line with Macron’s initiatives and the Commission, the Parliament thus argued that the Conference should set up mechanisms for listening to Europeans and that it should proceed without taboos while paying attention to the specific questions of the lead candidate system and transnational lists.

On 22 January 2020 the Commission presented its Communication,<sup>16</sup> according to which the Conference should deal with policies and institutions. Regarding the latter, the Communication restated the need to re-examine the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and the idea of transnational lists. The Communication also expressed commitment to listening to Europeans through a variety of channels, such as deliberative panels and digital platforms. While largely agreeing with the viewpoints of the Commission, critical voices among MEPs saw that the Commission was not as ambitious as the Parliament, both in terms of the format and the outcome of the Conference (see below).<sup>17</sup> On the Council side,

<sup>13</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, Franco-German non-paper on key questions and guidelines, <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> European Council meeting– Conclusions, Brussels, 12.12.2019, EUCO 29/19.

<sup>15</sup> Social issues should be priority for the Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/social-issues-should-be-priority-conference-future-europe>, 16.1.2020.

<sup>16</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe, Brussels, 22.1.2020, COM(2020) 27 final; The Commission’s contribution to shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe, 22.1.2020.

<sup>17</sup> Commission to Parliament: Let’s calm down on EU makeover, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-to-parliament-lets-calm-down-on-eu-makeover-ursula-von-der-leyen-emmanuel-macron/>, 21.1.2020; Conference on the Future of Europe: Don’t mention the T word, <https://www.politico.eu/article/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-dont-mention-the-treaty-word-european-commission-parliament-ursula-von-der-leyen/>, 22.1.2020.

the General Affairs Council addressed the issue on 28 January, concluding that ministers ‘underlined the need to ensure a balanced representation of the three EU institutions and to fully involve national parliaments’.<sup>18</sup>

But after the COVID-19 pandemic set in, there was mainly silence. The Parliament, its party groups, and also the Commission urged the Council to move ahead,<sup>19</sup> and finally in early February 2021 the Council adopted its position.<sup>20</sup> This paved the way for the joint statement of the three EU institutions adopted on 10 March, which outlined that the Conference operates under the authority of the Joint Presidency (presidents of the EP, Council, and Commission) and has an Executive Board where the three institutions have three seats each – Guy Verhofstadt from Renew Europe is a co-chair of the Board and the other two MEPs are Manfred Weber from EPP and Iratxe García Pérez from S&D; accordingly the three biggest political families are represented. The work of the Conference revolves around a multilingual digital platform,<sup>21</sup> citizens’ panels organised nationally and by the EU institutions, and a Plenary.<sup>22</sup> The Conference was officially launched on 9 May, Europe Day, and is expected to reach conclusions by spring 2022. Table 1 contains the organisational set-up of the Conference.

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<sup>18</sup> Council of the European Union, Outcome of the Council meeting, General Affairs, Brussels, 28 January 2020, 5573/20.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Future of Europe Conference: Council urged to move now, <https://euobserver.com/social/148472>, 27.5.2020; Conference on the Future of Europe: MEPs to push for launch by autumn, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2020-06-17/2/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-meps-to-push-for-launch-by-autumn>; Co-creating a citizens-centered Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://voxeurop.eu/en/co-creating-a-citizens-centered-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>, 9.10.2020; Future of Europe: EU Council urged to propose a chair, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/149743>, 14.10.2020; Liberal Pre-Summit meeting ahead of crucial EU Council, [https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberal\\_pre\\_summit\\_meeting\\_ahead\\_of\\_crucial\\_eu\\_summit](https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberal_pre_summit_meeting_ahead_of_crucial_eu_summit), 16.12.2020; Time for the Conference on the Future of Europe to start, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/150564>, 12.1.2021; Future of Europe: don’t waste any more time, <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/news/future-of-europe-don-t-waste-any-more-time>, 4.2.2021.

<sup>20</sup> Council of the European Union, Conference on the Future of Europe – revised Council position, Brussels, 3.2.2021, 5911/21.

<sup>21</sup> <https://futureu.europa.eu/>.

<sup>22</sup> Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe, Engaging with Citizens for Democracy – Building a More Resilient Europe, 10.3.2021. For further information, see <https://futureu.europa.eu/>.

**Table 1 The organisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe**

<b>Multilingual digital platform</b>	A place for citizens to share ideas and send online submissions. The platform is divided into the following topics: Climate change and the environment; Health; A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; EU in the world; Values and rights, rule of law, security; Digital transformation; European democracy; Migration; Education, culture, youth and sport; Other ideas. These ideas are collected and analysed throughout the Conference.
<b>Decentralised events</b>	Events organised by civil society actors and national, regional, and local authorities across the Union.
<b>European Citizens' Panels</b>	<p>Four panels, each with 200 citizens chosen randomly to ensure that they are representative of the EU's diversity, in terms of geographic origin, gender, age, socioeconomic background and level of education. Young people between 16 and 25 make up one-third of each panel. The panels focus on specific themes: Values, rights, rule of law, democracy, security; Climate change, environment/health; Stronger economy, social justice, jobs/education, youth, culture, sport/digital transformation; EU in the world/migration.</p> <p>Representatives from each panel take part in the Plenary, presenting the outcome of their discussions and formulating recommendations for the Union to follow up on.</p>
<b>Conference Plenary</b>	<p>Composed of 449 representatives: 108 from the Parliament, 54 from the Council (two per member state), 3 from the Commission, 108 representatives from all national parliaments, and 108 citizens (80 from the European Citizens' Panels, 27 from national Citizens' Panels or Conference events, and the President of the European Youth Forum), 18 from the Committee of the Regions, 18 from the Economic and Social Committee, 6 from regional authorities, 6 from local authorities, 12 from the social partners, and 8 from civil society.</p> <p>The Plenary is structured thematically around recommendations from the Citizens' Panels and input gathered from the Multilingual Digital Platform. The Plenary will submit its proposals to the Executive Board</p>
<b>Executive Board</b>	Co-chaired by the Parliament, Commission, and the Council, with three representatives each. It reports to the Joint Presidency and monitors the operation of the Conference. It draws up the final report together with the Plenary.
<b>Joint Presidency</b>	The Presidents of the Parliament, the Council, and the Commission, acting as its Joint Presidency.

The Conference is thus a mix of bottom-up deliberations and more top-down leadership (see also Fabbrini et al. 2021). The Plenary and the Executive Board should base their discussions on ideas emanating from the digital platform and the citizens' panels, but they consist of representatives from the three EU institutions. The Parliament is represented in the Plenary, the Executive Board, and the Joint Presidency, and especially the Plenary provides the EP groups a direct channel of influence.

Throughout the preparatory phase there were disagreements between the Parliament, the Commission, and the Council about the organisation of the Conference, including who would chair it, its content, as well as whether it could result in Treaty changes. The institutional set-up of the Conference thus reflects battles between more intergovernmental and supranational approaches, but the Commission and particularly the Parliament managed to win support for the Conference format. Here the initiative of Macron was clearly influential. The position of the Council was otherwise decidedly more intergovernmental, with most national governments against or at least very hesitant about Treaty change and other binding outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Also the Commission was hesitant about public commitments to Treaty reform. These disagreements and uncertainties have continued since the launch of the Conference. And, even if the Conference manages to agree on ambitious reform proposals, implementing them can be difficult and in any case Treaty change requires unanimity.

## 4.2 Building coalitions and party networks

Turning next to political dynamics inside the Parliament, we can see from the beginning the EP trying to claim 'ownership' of the Conference. There has clearly been from the outset rather high interest in the Conference among MEPs. As expected, the leaders of party groups have been strongly involved. The Conference of Presidents – the body responsible for organizing Parliament's business that consists of the EP president and the party groups' chairs – established in October 2019 a Working Group on the Conference on the Future of Europe, with the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) having the main responsibility for dealing with the matter. Chaired by the late EP president David Sassoli (S&D), the Working Group brought together representatives from the party groups, including Paulo Rangel (EPP), Gabriele Bischoff (S&D), Verhofstadt (Renew Europe), and Tajani (EPP) in his capacity as the AFCO chair.<sup>24</sup> AFCO did not appoint a rapporteur, as it did not issue a report, just the opinion mentioned below.

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<sup>23</sup> Future of Europe: EU Council vetoes treaty change, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/148755>, 25.6.2020; Dozen EU states spell out 'Future of Europe' priorities, <https://euobserver.com/democracy/151319>.

<sup>24</sup> Preparing the Conference on the Future of Europe, Briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, December 2019; [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)644202](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2019)644202)

AFCO organised a public hearing on 4 December 2019 that featured a long list of speakers from EU institutions, academia and civil society.<sup>25</sup> AFCO adopted its opinion on 9 December but not before sifting through the 238 amendments tabled by the MEPs seated on the committee.<sup>26</sup> This was the only ‘outreach’ effort by AFCO, but interviews suggest that MEPs spread the word about the Conference in different ways, from engaging with civil society actors to blog texts to speaking about the Conference within their national parties or with colleagues from domestic legislatures. The Working Group reported to the Conference of Presidents on 19 December, stating that the ‘note reflects the current consensus among a majority of the political groups on the scope, governance and outcome of the Conference’.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the preparations for the Conference were overseen by the Conference of Presidents indicates the high salience of the topic in the Parliament – and was simultaneously also meant as a signal to the other EU institutions that the Conference deserves to be taken seriously.

The main contents of the Working Group paper were included in the subsequent EP resolution adopted on 15 January 2020.<sup>28</sup> The motion for the resolution was tabled by MEPs from all party groups with the exception of the two Eurosceptical groups, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID). On behalf of EPP it was signed by Weber, Rangel, Tajani, and Danuta Hübner; from S&D by García Pérez, Bischoff, and Domènec Ruiz Devesa; and from Renew Europe by Dacian Cioloș, Verhofstadt, and Pascal Durand.<sup>29</sup> The plenary discussed the issue in the presence of commissioner Šuica and the Council Presidency, with active input from across the party groups.<sup>30</sup> The debate reflected the broad partisan consensus, with the Eurosceptics adopting more critical positions.<sup>31</sup> After the debate and votes on 37 amendments, the Parliament adopted its rather detailed resolution with 494 votes to 147 and 49 abstentions. In the EPP Group cohesion was 97.3%, in

<sup>25</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe: hearing with Parliament and Commission VPs, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191205IPR68320/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-hearing-with-parliament-and-commission-vps>, 5.12.2019; <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/product-details/20191120CHE06561>.

<sup>26</sup> Opinion on the Conference on the Future of Europe, Constitutional Affairs Committee, 10.12.2019; [https://emeeting.europarl.europa.eu/emeeting/committee/agenda/201912/AFCO?meeting=AFCO-2019-1209\\_1P&session=12-09-18-00](https://emeeting.europarl.europa.eu/emeeting/committee/agenda/201912/AFCO?meeting=AFCO-2019-1209_1P&session=12-09-18-00).

<sup>27</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, Main outcome of the Working Group, 19.12.2019.

<sup>28</sup> European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe. European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (2019/2990(RSP)), European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe, 15.1.2020.

<sup>29</sup> Motion for a resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the Council and the Commission pursuant to Rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (2019/2990(RSP)), 9.1.2020; [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0036\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0036_EN.html)

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-01-15-ITM-006\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-01-15-ITM-006_EN.html)

<sup>31</sup> Parliament kicks off debate on the Future of Europe conference, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/parliament-kicks-off-debate-on-the-future-of-europe-conference/>, 16.1.2020.

S&D 95.7%, and in Renew Europe 95.5%.<sup>32</sup> Examining the composition of the Working Group and the actors involved in the Parliament, we note the presence of group leaders – Weber and vice-chair Rangel from EPP, García Pérez from S&D, and Ciołos from Renew Europe and other seasoned veterans, such as Verhofstadt, of inter-institutional bargaining.

Reflecting the positions of the Commission and the Council, the EP resolution highlighted listening to the citizens, identified a broad range of policies to be tackled, and opined that ‘issues such as the lead candidate system and transnational lists should be taken into consideration’. The resolution did not hide the ambition of the EP to lead the Conference. The next day the Conference of Presidents outlined the composition of the Executive Coordination Board for the Conference, with MEPs from EPP, S&D, and Renew Europe and a representative each from the Council and the Commission. According to this plan, Verhofstadt would have been the Conference president, with Weber (EPP) and a representative of the S&D Group his deputies.<sup>33</sup>

After the COVID-induced silence, during which the Parliament was forced to sit back and just wait, on 10 June 2021, the EP’s Conference of Presidents announced the names of the 108 MEPs, members of the EP delegation, to take part in the Conference Plenary.<sup>34</sup> Respectively, 28, 23 and 15 seats, were allocated to the three biggest political groups. The inaugural Plenary meeting was held on 19 June 2021 in Strasbourg, with physical and remote participation. The Parliament’s delegation to the Conference met prior to the inaugural plenary session. Now it was also time for the party group caucuses to be constituted. While the formal structure of the Conference provides the institutional framework, the party group caucuses form an important informal part.

Having examined political dynamics inside the Parliament, with group leaders prominent in guiding the issue through the committees and the plenary, where the resolution reflected the tradition of building large coalitions between the main groups, we move next to the strategies and behaviour of the Europarties and their EP groups. The overarching question is how the political families are working in and around the Conference to advance their goals. Overall, it is noticeable how little public material the Europarties and their EP party groups released directly about the Conference before it was launched. However, the political families have a legacy of advocating both deeper integration and

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<sup>32</sup> Voting statistics from <https://www.votewatch.eu/>

<sup>33</sup> Parliament picks Verhofstadt for new president role, <https://www.politico.eu/article/parliament-picks-guy-verhofstadt-for-new-president-role/>, 16.1.2020.

<sup>34</sup> Parliament’s delegation to the Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/hr/press-room/20210610IPR05901/parliament-s-delegation-to-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe>, 10.6.2021. The full composition of the Parliament’s delegation to the Conference, as well as all other information on MEPs’ work in the Conference, is available on the EP webpage: <https://conference-delegation.europarl.europa.eu/en/>. See also <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/conference-on-the-future-of-europe>.

a stronger position for the Parliament and the Europarties, and certainly the ‘future of Europe’ featured consistently in various documents and events of the three political families. We begin with the EPP and its party group.

### EPP / EPP Group

The EPP has a strongly pro-European common heritage. Reflecting this conviction, it was only natural they came up with a staunchly pro-integrationist vision for the Conference. However, the EPP Congress in November 2019 in Zagreb had a particular focus on climate change. Had it been someone from their own ranks and not President Macron who took an initiative to establish the Conference, then perhaps the EPP would have shown more interest in the issue. In any case, it is evident that from early on it was the EPP Group that was more actively involved in the Conference, and not the Europarty. The EPP Group in mid-January 2020 issued a brief general press release coinciding with the adoption of the EP resolution, with Rangel, the group vice-chair responsible for coordinating matters related to ‘the future of Europe’, basically just summarising the planned Conference agenda and format.<sup>35</sup> But it also made clear that the EPP Group wanted to change the EU and that required concrete proposals and turning ideas into action.

The day after the member states in the Council gave the ‘green light’ to the Conference, the EPP Group on 4 February 2021 released a communiqué in which Rangel welcomed the ‘green light’: ‘We applaud the fact that all European actors are finally on the same page for the Conference on the Future of Europe’.<sup>36</sup> He also said that the Conference would provide ‘innovative solutions’ to the EU’s new challenges. Along similar lines, EPP Group chair Weber said in the same communiqué that the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic showed that debating the future of Europe is ‘crucial’. According to Weber, the Conference should ‘lay the foundations for a new consensus on Europe’s mission and capabilities in the 21st century’, adding that ‘the ambition of the Conference should not have any taboos’.

The EPP Group organised various meetings and events involving its members and its partners. Notably, the EPP Group on 21 April 2021 hosted the live webinar event ‘The Future of Europe’, which brought together several participants including German Chancellor Merkel and EPP Group leader Weber.<sup>37</sup> Merkel

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<sup>35</sup> Broad, open, interactive and inclusive debate on the future of Europe, <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/news/broad-open-and-inclusive-debate-on-the-future-of-europe>, 15.1.2020.

<sup>36</sup> EU/Presidency: Paulo Rangel MEP praises 27 for ‘green-lighting’ Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://www.lusa.pt/ppue2021/1661/article/30596054/eu-presidency-paulo-rangel-mep-praises-27-for-green-lighting-conference-on-the-future-of-europe>, 4.2.2021.

<sup>37</sup> EPP Group LIVE Event: The Future of Europe, <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/events/the-future-of-europe>, 21.4.2021.



said that she wanted ‘concrete’ proposals to emerge from the Conference.<sup>38</sup> She was not opposed to Treaty change to reset the bloc’s future. The comments from Merkel reflected a strong will to extend the competences of the EU in particular areas. Weber in turn commented that ‘we should use the upcoming Conference on the EU’s future, to think long and hard as to whether we need Treaty change.’<sup>39</sup> Among the speakers in the following specific panel on the Conference were two MEPs who were members of the EPP Group Task Force on the Future of Europe – Vladimír Bilčík and Jeroen Lenaers. Soon they would be appointed as EPP Group members of the EP delegation to the Conference. Concluding remarks were given by Rangel and Commission vice-president Šuica, who in the Commission deals with the Conference on the Future of Europe and is also from the EPP family. The event demonstrated that this political family was fully committed to reinvigorating the debate on European integration.

Another example of Europarties facilitating links between EU institutions came when the Bureau of the EPP Group met in Rome on 20–22 September 2021 to discuss with members of the Italian government and Italian MPs various topics including ‘the future of Europe’. Commission President von der Leyen addressed an internal meeting with EPP Group members (in camera), and among the speakers were other members of the Commission, including Šuica.<sup>40</sup>

Interaction between the EPP and the EPP Group took place through the EPP Group Caucus, constituted in June 2021, with Rangel as the EPP vice-president and EPP Group vice-chair a key figure and interlocutor. Rangel also chaired the EPP Group Task Force on the Future of Europe, a *de facto* working group, which monitors proceedings in the Conference. As EPP Group chair, Weber also has a seat on the EPP Presidency, with aspirations to become the new president of the EPP. As a representative in the Executive Board of the Conference, Weber will have an important role when the final report of the Conference is to be drawn up. He was centrally involved in the various activities of the EPP Group in relation to the Conference, for example when the EPP Group Position Paper on the Future of Europe was adopted on 19 May 2021 (see below).

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<sup>38</sup> Conference on Future of Europe must not be ‘pie in the sky’ affair warns Angela Merkel, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/conference-on-future-of-europe-must-not-be-pie-in-the-sky-affair-warns-angela-merkel>, 26.4.2021.

<sup>39</sup> Treaty change may be needed to give EU powers it needs to tackle future health pandemics, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/treaty-change-may-be-needed-to-give-eu-powers-it-needs-to-tackle-future-health-pandemics>, 23.4.2021.

<sup>40</sup> EPP Group Bureau meeting in Rome to discuss agriculture, migration, jobs and the future of Europe, <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/news/epp-group-bureau-meeting-in-rome>, 16.9.2021.

The EPP Group Caucus is significantly larger than just MEPs. It consists of members from other delegations, such as national parliamentarians. This should mean that it will be more difficult to reach intra-caucus consensus and poses a challenge to the group leadership. As for the cohesion in the EPP Group Caucus, it had not really been tried six months into the Conference. This confirms that the Conference proceeded quite slowly, with the real debates and choices – to the extent that there will be any as the Conference can also adopt a broader report without any specific recommendations – set to occur later in spring 2022.

## PES / S&D

The PES political family has also invested resources in ‘the future of Europe’ for a longer time, with various resolutions adopted and also working groups established that deal with both the future of integration and the role of the PES family in the process. As with EPP, these resolutions have called for a stronger EU with more supranational elements.

Like EPP, the S&D Group and PES organised a range of events relating broadly to the ‘future of Europe’. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, the PES Presidency had outlined a series of party conferences for 2020, with the first of them focusing on the future of Europe and events of PES activists to support these conferences.<sup>41</sup> Jointly, PES and S&D organised a streamed event in Brussels titled ‘The Political Vision of the EU’s Constitutional Future’ on 6 February 2020, with representatives from EU institutions, FEPS, civil society actors (including ETUC), and academics among the speakers.<sup>42</sup> Later that year, in December 2020, the S&D group adopted its strategy on the Conference, claiming their political family ‘has the most far-reaching vision on the future of Europe’.<sup>43</sup>

A few weeks ahead of the launch of the Conference, the S&D Group on 16 April 2021 launched the #Progressives4Europe initiative as a debate platform to promote ‘progressive’ views and voices to feed into the Conference on the Future of Europe.<sup>44</sup> This initiative, developed in cooperation with PES and FEPS, among

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<sup>41</sup> Progressives put pivotal change on the EU’s 2020 agenda, PES conferences and Congress will drive this change forward, <https://www.pes.eu/en/news-events/news/detail/Progressives-put-pivotal-change-on-the-EU-s-2020-agenda-PES-conferences-and-Congress-will-drive-this-change-forward/>, 7.2.2020.

<sup>42</sup> The Political Vision of the EU’s Constitutional Future, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/events/political-vision-eus-constitutional-future>, 6.2.2020.

<sup>43</sup> “The Conference on the Future of Europe should be extended until 2023”, say Iratxe García and Marek Belka, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/conference-future-europe-should-be-extended-until-2023-say-iratxe-garcia-and-marek-belka>, 10.12.2020; S&D Strategy on the Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/publications/sd-strategy-conference-future-europe>, 9.12.2020; [https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/sites/default/files/2020-12/sd\\_strategy\\_cofe\\_en\\_201210.pdf](https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/sites/default/files/2020-12/sd_strategy_cofe_en_201210.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe #Progressives4Europe. Your views, your voice, our future, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/channel/conference-future-europe-progressives4europe-your-views-your-voice-our-future>, 16.4.2021.

others, was promoted at a high-level hybrid event in Rome on 3 May,<sup>45</sup> with several more events organised across Europe. Moreover, the initiative included a multilingual debate platform in 24 EU languages alongside a Facebook page (Progressive 4 Europe), that encourages people to submit views and ideas online and to help shape the Progressive's contribution to the debate on the future of Europe. Events continued in autumn 2021 and included a citizens' debate or a conversation on the topic of the future of Europe with the group chair and others; a meeting in Malta of S&D Group members including an event with citizens in the context of the Conference; and an S&D /Progressive family meeting in Florence on 11 December 2021 to debate the future of Europe.<sup>46</sup>

The day before the inaugural Plenary of the Conference, the first 'Progressive Caucus' took place in Strasbourg on 18 June 2021 to set priorities.<sup>47</sup> The meeting was co-hosted by the S&D Group and PES. It was the opening of the Progressive Caucus, with contributions from S&D Group chair García Pérez, PES President (and MEP) Sergei Stanishev, and EP President Sassoli. The caucus meeting brought together MEPs, MPs, Commissioners, and the Portuguese presidency. A week later, after the inaugural Plenary session, there was the PES conference on the Future of Europe, gathering 'progressives' in Berlin on 25–26 June 2021 to set out their ambitions for Europe.<sup>48</sup> The event brought together leaders and prime ministers of PES member parties.

Ties between the PES and the S&D Group are strengthened by the fact that the PES president Stanishev, from Bulgaria, is also an MEP. And García Pérez (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE), the chair of the S&D Group, is the

<sup>45</sup> The initiative was also developed in cooperation with PES Women, Young European Socialists (YES), the PES Group in the Committee of the Regions and SOLIDAR, the European and worldwide network of civil society organisations. See The Conference on the Future of Europe: our future is in YOUR hands!, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/channel/conference-future-europe-our-future-your-hands>, 3.5.2021; Conference on the future of Europe - our Europe, our future, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/events/conference-future-europe-our-europe-our-future>, 3.5.2021.

<sup>46</sup> See <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/search-page?keys=Conference%20on%20the%20future%20of%20Europe>; <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/futureofeurope>; S&Ds: Progressive family meets in Florence to debate the Future of Europe. This time is different, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sds-progressive-family-meets-florence-debate-future-europe-time-different>, 6.12.2021; The Future is Democracy: Progressive Europe at crossroads - Saturday 11 December from 9.45 to 18.00, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/events/future-democracy-progressive-europe-crossroads-saturday-11-december-945-1800>, 11.12.2021. The meeting in Florence was in connection with the third and last session of one of the European Citizens' Panels of the Conference, Panel 2 'European democracy/values, rights, rule of law, security', held at the European University Institute in Florence.

<sup>47</sup> First Progressive caucus on the Future of Europe set for eve of plenary, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/events/first-progressive-caucus-future-europe-set-eve-plenary>, 18.6.2021.

<sup>48</sup> With Courage. For Europe. high-level conference: progressives to gather in Berlin, [https://pes.eu/news\\_content.php?id=1420](https://pes.eu/news_content.php?id=1420), 15.6.2021; PES Conference: For Europe. With Courage – Berlin, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/events/pes-conference-europe-courage-berlin>, 26.6.2021. It was a hybrid conference, live-streamed from Berlin.

first vice-president of the PES. These ties make it easier to reach out to the entire political family. S&D MEPs centrally involved in the Conference include Ruiz Devesa, S&D spokesperson / coordinator for AFCO, the EP's Constitutional Affairs committee, and Bischoff, AFCO's vice-chair and a member of the EP's Working Group on the Conference on the Future of Europe. Responsible for the Conference within S&D, Bischoff took a leading role in the group's internal work with the Task Force. Bischoff was also involved and active in FEPS.<sup>49</sup>

Ahead of each meeting of the Conference Plenary, a political caucus is organised by the PES with the social democratic members of the Plenary. This offers an opportunity to discuss policy priorities with local and national Plenary members – showing thus how the European, national and local levels coordinate inside the political family. While the PES has (co-)organised various events, the S&D Group is more influential in relation to the Conference itself. Drawing on EP resources, not least staffing, the group offers a framework for Conference activities. S&D organises a horizontal Task Force on thematic priorities with partner organisations, experts and national as well as local politicians. This horizontal working group is open to all S&D members. During these meetings they talk about recent developments and political priorities. Cohesion amongst the social democrat members of the Conference plenary was described as 'strong'. Yet, as in the other political families, there is likely to be disagreements once the Conference has to take a stance on policy issues and perhaps also about how to proceed after the Conference itself. That, too, remains to be seen.

### ALDE / Renew Europe

The third largest political grouping, the liberal family consisting of ALDE and Renew Europe, not only presented a strongly pro-European vision for the Conference but also underlined the group's role behind it. When the Parliament in January 2020 adopted the resolution backing the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Renew Europe Group claimed the resolution included most of its proposals and those of its negotiators Verhofstadt (Open-VLD, Belgium) and Durand (Renaissance, France).<sup>50</sup> Like the resolution itself, Renew Europe expected that the Conference would be open to citizens and civil society, and discuss an overhaul of the European project. The next day, another press release even claimed that 'Renew Europe put forward the proposal on the Conference' and noted that 'our family will play a central role in driving it', referring to the proposed leading role of Guy Verhofstadt.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> E.g., How can the Conference on the Future of Europe pave the way for the realisation of our dreams for Europe?, [https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/734-com\\_publications\\_publications.html](https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/734-com_publications_publications.html), 8.5.2020.

<sup>50</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe: the time has come to democratize the European Union, <https://www.reneweuropengroup.eu/news/2020-01-15/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-the-time-has-come-to-democratize-the-european-union>, 15.1.2020.

<sup>51</sup> Renew Europe will have a central role in the Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://www.reneweuropengroup.eu/news/2020-01-16/renew-europe-will-have-a-central-role-in-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe>, 16.1.2020.

As is typical for the congresses of the Europarties, the institutional questions and the ‘future of Europe’ also featured on the agenda of the ALDE congress held in Athens in October 2019.<sup>52</sup> ALDE had made plans prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding organising events involving member parties and individual party members to collect and shape ideas feeding into the Conference. In November 2020, ALDE Council issued a rather detailed position paper on the Conference, recommending a series of concrete changes to how the EU institutions work – and that after the Conference, ‘a European Convention should be convened in order to implement necessary treaty adjustments’.<sup>53</sup> ALDE also stated that it ‘will, in the second half of 2021, organise its own Conference on the Future of Europe’.<sup>54</sup> ALDE thus planned to host a conference on the Conference on the Future of Europe to discuss the different input received and hear from liberal leaders their visions on ‘how to take the Future of Europe forward’.<sup>55</sup> However, by the end of 2021 no such conference had taken place or been announced.

In early 2021, ALDE launched an Action Plan on the Future of Europe, which includes a dedicated digital hub, a series of townhall meetings organised with ALDE member parties, as well as an (intended) ALDE conference dedicated to the Conference on the Future of Europe.<sup>56</sup> Throughout October 2021, ALDE member parties and partners across Europe held a series of events to discuss the future of Europe, also involving MEPs, and events on Europe’s future, focusing on the Conference on the Future of Europe, were organised by member parties – for instance, in Belgium, Estonia, Ireland, and Spain.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, ALDE partners, such as the European Liberal Youth (LYMEC) and the Renew Europe Group in the Committee of the Regions, which is part of the Conference, contributed to the ongoing debate on democracy and citizens’ engagement in the context of the Conference.

Renew Europe launched on 1 June 2021 a series of monthly ‘Values Talks’ with the participation of the then Renew Europe chair Ciolos and leading politicians of the Renew Europe liberal and pro-European family.<sup>58</sup> Against the background

<sup>52</sup> The programme for the ALDE congress had a panel on ‘Debating Our Future! – Young Liberals on Pan-European Challenges’, while the congress adopted resolutions on ‘Transnational lists’ and on ‘Strengthening European democracy and values’. The latter resolution calls for ‘the ALDE Party to provide its contribution to the “Conference on the Future of Europe” in the most effective way(s)’.

<sup>53</sup> ALDE input to the Conference on the Future of Europe, ALDE virtual council, [https://www.aldeparty.eu/tags/council\\_online\\_november\\_2020](https://www.aldeparty.eu/tags/council_online_november_2020).

<sup>54</sup> Liberal pre-summit meeting ahead of crucial EU Council, [https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberal\\_pre\\_summit\\_meeting\\_ahead\\_of\\_crucial\\_eu\\_summit](https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberal_pre_summit_meeting_ahead_of_crucial_eu_summit), 16.12.2020.

<sup>55</sup> See [https://www.aldeparty.eu/alde\\_conference](https://www.aldeparty.eu/alde_conference).

<sup>56</sup> See <https://www.aldeparty.eu/cofoe>.

<sup>57</sup> Liberals take action on the Future of Europe, [https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberals\\_take\\_action\\_on\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_europe](https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberals_take_action_on_the_future_of_europe), 3.11.2021.

<sup>58</sup> Renew Europe launch ‘Values Talks’, with Estonian PM, [https://euobserver.com/stakeholders/152001?utm\\_source=euobs&utm\\_medium=email](https://euobserver.com/stakeholders/152001?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email), 1.6.2021.

of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the talks would include questions from civil society organisations, citizens and journalists. In a series of interviews (from June 2021) with members of its delegation to the Conference, Renew Europe put the same set of questions, one of which was ‘Renew Europe has initiated the idea of the Conference. What will be the Group’s priorities?’<sup>59</sup> And on a more individual level, ‘What topics will you be focusing on?’ While there is much consistency in the answers, particularly relating to citizens and democracy, including transnational lists for EP elections, it is obvious that the members were not controlled by any common talking points. They were clearly free to express what they themselves, and possibly their party at home, wanted. That said, there may well be a ‘convergence’, as a close observer and interviewee put it, adding that this is what happens when you put people in the same room.

In connection with the Conference’s second plenary in Strasbourg on 22–23 October 2021, Renew Europe organised a caucus meeting on 22 October to discuss common priorities.<sup>60</sup> The meeting, attended by MEPs and MPs, discussed the agendas of the working groups now constituted by the Conference Plenary, as well as the inputs obtained from the various citizens’ events held so far.<sup>61</sup> Durand, coordinator of Renew Europe in AFCE, is also coordinating the group regarding the Conference, while Verhofstadt, co-chair of the Executive Board of the Conference, is coordinating matters at that and the EP level and is the spokesperson for Renew Europe on the Conference. Cohesion within the Renew Europe Conference Caucus was said to be ‘fine’, but as with other groups this cohesion had not yet been tested by the end of 2021. The most important cleavage in the group is the one over the EU itself, regarding European integration. The majority of the liberal members is pro-integration and uses the Conference to get support for a stronger EU and Parliament. With Renew Europe MEPs and staff active in the Spinelli Group, a pro-federalist approach comes naturally for them with, for example, calls for ‘transnational lists’ in European elections.<sup>62</sup> And this is an issue that is driven by Verhofstadt and others, also from the other political groups. However, an interviewee pointed out, a number of MEPs in Renew Europe are non-integrationists, including Nordic members.

<sup>59</sup> See <https://reneweurope.medium.com/>.

<sup>60</sup> Liberals take action on the Future of Europe, [https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberals\\_take\\_action\\_on\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_europe](https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberals_take_action_on_the_future_of_europe), 3.11.2021.

<sup>61</sup> Liberals take part in second plenary dedicated to COFOE, [https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberals\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_second\\_plenary\\_dedicated\\_to\\_cofoe](https://www.aldeparty.eu/liberals_take_part_in_second_plenary_dedicated_to_cofoe), 25.10.2021.

<sup>62</sup> The cross-party Spinelli Group brings together federalist-minded politicians and others who are advocating a constitution for the Union. That requires a constitutional Convention (The Spinelli Group 2018). This is where you find MEPs and Conference representatives like Bischoff (S&D), Durand (Renew Europe), Hübner (EPP), and Verhofstadt (Renew Europe). There is even a Spinelli Group Caucus, with the participation of several members of the Conference Plenary. See The first meeting of the “Spinelli Caucus and the Spinelli Manifesto for the Conference on the Future of Europe”, <https://thespinelligroup.eu/the-first-meeting-of-the-spinelli-caucus-and-the-spinelli-manifesto-for-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>, 18.6.2021; see also [https://thespinelligroup.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SPINELLI-MANIFESTO\\_V\\_light.pdf](https://thespinelligroup.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SPINELLI-MANIFESTO_V_light.pdf).

In line with our expectations, in the cases of EPP and PES we already showed that the EP groups were more present in the Conference than the actual Europarties, and this applies perhaps even more so in the liberal party family. According to an interviewee, ALDE was ‘not very much present in the Conference’. However, ALDE has organised, occasionally together with ELF, different events, sometimes upon requests from the Renew Europe Group. In other words, ALDE has no major role in the Conference and there seems to be limited political coordination between Renew Europe and ALDE regarding the Conference. That said, there are individual MEPs who hold prominent positions in ALDE,<sup>63</sup> and thereby interaction between ALDE and Renew Europe is stronger, at least on a personal level. There may also be a natural explanation for ALDE being less active in the Conference, as the degree of overlapping membership between ALDE and Renew Europe is significantly lower than between the EPP/EPP Group and PES/S&D (see Section 3). It appears as if the latter two political families tend to have stronger cooperation and coordination overall.

The case studies above have referred to the political foundations of the three political families. Their contribution should not be underestimated, even though their influence is harder to detect. Most of the interaction between political foundations, Europarties and the EP groups is informal and active, with overlap in terms of personnel. The WMCES, FEPS, and ELF hosted various events and produced a steady stream of publications, often drawing on academic expertise, which specifically either directly dealt with the Conference or more generally with the future of Europe and institutional or policy questions. The WMCES organised events and published material about the Conference on its website, including blogposts<sup>64</sup> – ELF was an additional resource for ALDE/ Renew Europe,<sup>65</sup> with, for example, the ELF’s *Liberal White Book: Europe 2030* (2021) intended to feed into the future of Europe debate and ELF also organised events specifically linked to the Conference on the Future of Europe.<sup>66</sup> FEPS was also highly active and the publication *Our European Future* (May 2021), containing proposals to the Conference on the Future of Europe, was among its contributions to the debate about the future of Europe.<sup>67</sup> Other contributions

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<sup>63</sup> Notably, Dita Charanzová, MEP (Czechia), a vice-president of the Parliament and member of Renew Europe’s delegation to the Conference, is one of the vice-presidents of the ALDE party. Ilhan Kyuchyuk (Bulgaria), another MEP and member of Renew Europe’s delegation to the Conference, is ALDE party’s acting co-president. Yet another ALDE party vice-president, Luis Garicano (Spain), is MEP but not in the Conference.

<sup>64</sup> Prospects for the Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/blog/prospects-for-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>, 16.12.2021.

<sup>65</sup> See [https://www.aldeparty.eu/cofoe\\_resources](https://www.aldeparty.eu/cofoe_resources).

<sup>66</sup> See <https://liberalforum.eu/think-tank/liberal-white-book-europe-2030/>.

<sup>67</sup> Book: *Our European Future*, FEPS contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/797-our-european-future.html>, 27.5.2021.



were made through the FEPS Policy Brief, for example.<sup>68</sup> The political foundations also provide platforms for activists in the respective political families to outline their goals for the Conference. Finally, the political foundations collaborated, for example through organising in September 2020, with the Former Members Association and the European University Institute, a webinar on ‘Together for the future of Europe’.<sup>69</sup>

In summary, the transnational party networks are clearly active regarding the Conference and the broader theme of the ‘future of Europe’. EPP, PES / S&D, and ALDE / Renew Europe each organise a variety of events and produce documents and resolutions, but in all three families the EP group is more prominent than the Europarty. The networks are horizontal, bringing together MEPs, Commissioners, the political foundations, European-level interest groups, members from the Committee of Regions, as well as the youth and women’s organisations of the Europarties – and vertical, as they also include national member parties and occasionally also activists. These networks have developed over decades, but they can essentially be understood as networks of European and national party elites. We have detected only sporadic ‘outreach’ efforts towards grassroots party activists, and their direct participation or influence in the formulation of Europarty positions regarding the Conference seems almost non-existent, although individual politicians and national parties have organised events relating to the Conference. Overall, the partisan networks keep up the momentum and join together European and national politicians to discuss the future of the EU, but beyond that it is very difficult to assess their actual importance for the Conference proceedings or outcomes.

### 4.3 Partisan positions

The final section of the analysis explores the objectives and priorities of the three political families. We focus deliberately on institutional questions but include also policy issues, as often the two are directly related, for example when the documents speak about extending majority voting in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) / Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or deeper economic integration. As detailed in the previous section, the Europarties and their EP groups have adopted a variety of resolutions and documents relating both to the Conference and the broader theme of the ‘future of Europe’. Most of these are fairly short texts about current decisions and policy processes. Hence, we focus in our analysis on the key position papers of the Europarties or EP groups on the Conference that are longer and cover the entire spectrum of issues – essentially these position papers are comparable to the party or election programmes of national parties or the Europarties. We begin again with the EPP.

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<sup>68</sup> E.g., ‘A progressive approach to the Conference on the Future of Europe’ by Richard Corbett, former MEP for the S&D Group, [https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/810-com\\_publications\\_publications.html](https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/810-com_publications_publications.html), 27.7.2021.

<sup>69</sup> See <https://www.formermembers.eu/event/2020-eprs-event/>.



## EPP / EPP Group

The EPP Group adopted its position paper on the Future of Europe on 19 May 2021.<sup>70</sup> The paper is in line with EPP's long-standing pro-European heritage and demonstrates a willingness to reform the Union, institutionally and structurally. EPP links the Conference directly to Treaty change: 'we might consider designating the [Conference] with the task to prepare a new Convention to draft a revised treaty.' This is significant given opposition to this among national governments, and the cautious wording used by EPP Group chair Weber on various occasions.

We want the Conference on the Future of Europe to be meaningful in developing the future polity and policy of the EU. Hence, we want to put forward profound questions about Europe's democratic future. It is important that the Conference will not be misconstrued as an alibi event for pursuing only cosmetic changes to the EU's political system. Otherwise, we risk our legitimacy and gamble on the future of Europeans. The European People's Party has always been the driving force behind European integration. We are proud of the legacy of leaders like Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi and Konrad Adenauer. Now our generation is called upon to do its part and start a new chapter in the history of the European Union.

Treaty change is thus openly advocated, and reforms are linked to global crises:

We want to further equip our Union with the right and sufficient resources and structures to be able to tackle effectively the next emergencies, including the climate challenge. The European Union has to be the problem-solver of the next crisis and at the forefront of the technological and environmental challenges in the coming years.

The EPP sees Europe 'as a democratic role model for the world'. It believes in a 'strong and united Europe' and recognises that

answering people's concerns might demand institutional and structural reforms, at Union and national level, that make Europe stronger and more resilient while building a real connection with citizens across the EU. These reforms shall not be limited to internal matters, but shall also envisage an international and global orientation. Europeans need to assert themselves in a world of uni-laterally acting superpowers with which no European state can compete alone.

EPP calls for accountability and transparency, whilst emphasising that 'all levels of the European Union need to communicate with one voice and provide solutions to political issues'.

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<sup>70</sup> EPP Group Position Paper on the Future of Europe, May 2021.

The solution is stronger EU level representative democracy. The EPP sees Europe ‘as a democratic role model for the world’, and it wants

to ensure greater citizen participation and engagement, greater accountability for decisions, with a livelier parliamentary democracy at the national level and a stronger European Parliament at its core. Democracy and the safeguard of human rights and freedoms, the rule of law and separation of powers are at the heart of our European identity. But democracy needs to be deepened and developed at European level.

The European Parliament is at the core of the argument:

The European Union has to become a representative democracy where people have a greater say on matters of EU competence: we want to show that the European Union can be the leading role model for the effective representation of its citizens. Only with political competition at European level will the people have a clear say about their own future. ‘Take back control’ was the Brexiteers’ slogan. Brexit has instead shown that being out of the decision-making process only results in a loss of control. The European Parliament, as the people’s representation, ensures that Europeans have a say in the future of our Union. For this reason, we want to boost representation and parliamentarism at the European level.

The Parliament ‘should have full legislative and budgetary powers, including the right to initiate, amend and repeal any European legislation in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure. The MFF [Multiannual Financial Framework] should have the same time frame of the Parliament’s mandate’. In terms of accountability, the EPP sees that

the Commission must become more accountable to Parliament by strengthening Parliament’s political control through an updated and effective right of inquiry, the ability to impeach single Commissioners as well as the introduction of a constructive motion of no-confidence, allowing the European Parliament to choose the new President of the Commission with an absolute majority.

The EPP also opines that ‘each Commission should be built on a concrete coalition agreement based on the political guidelines and concrete projects’.

Regarding the European elections, the EPP Group wants to reinforce the *Spitzenkandidaten* system:

To strengthen democracy at European level and accountability in the eyes of Europeans, we also want to reinforce the ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ system. This means that the biggest party shall form the governing majority and will get the right to nominate the President of the Commission, who then needs a majority support of the EP (‘biggest party has the first choice’ rule). The candidature of every lead

candidate shall be conditional on the support of their respective national parties and they shall undertake a process of democratic nomination from European parties. To strengthen the democratic selection of the Commission, it would be convenient if every future Commissioner could also run in a prominent position in the elections in his respective Member State. This will contribute to increase the transparency of their nomination in the European executive and show a real impact on citizens' preferences. As a consequence, every Commissioner can be a Member of the European Parliament.

However, the EPP reiterates its earlier negative position on transnational lists:

As in every multi-level governance system, such as the European Union, the geographical representation is, next to ideological representation, crucial. Therefore, we reiterate our disagreement over transnational lists as they run against the principle of territorial representation, and they would put smaller Member States' candidates at a competitive disadvantage compared to those of larger Member States. We want to reform the electoral law to create a vibrant party competition that mirrors the nature of our Union and ensures that every European voter has an equal and broad right to participate in European elections regardless of his or her place of residence and every Member of the European Parliament is connected to his/her constituency.

The EPP Group further notes that

a strong democracy requires lively political parties and civil society. Therefore, we should reflect on a reform of the party law at European level to improve citizens' involvement in European democracy. Furthermore, we want to strengthen the democratic links between the various political levels in the EU. For example, there should be the possibility of permitting the President of the European Commission and Commissioners to also hold functions in their respective parties.

Overall, the position paper is strongly in favour of deeper integration across policy domains while referring to the EU's values and solidarity. It calls for more powers to the various agencies of the Union. Regarding external action, the EPP argues that new institutions are needed:

In a world in turmoil, we should take a step further and work closer together when it comes to defence. The EU should establish its own military unit, with Joint Headquarters, based on volunteers coming from the Member States. Such a unit, complementing national military forces and compatible with NATO, could be an important European defence capability. This military unit would be financed by the EU, would report to a newly established Defence Affairs Council and hold a duty to involve and report to the European Parliament. For Europe to act as one, a new Defence Commissioner should also be established.

Qualified majority voting (QMV) should apply to all areas that enhance the external action capability of the European Union. ‘Only then will we be able to truly speak with one single voice as Europeans. For this purpose, the European Union should move towards holding a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, as an additional seat to the one held by France.

In addition, in economic governance the EPP believes in institutional reform:

We intend to strengthen and deepen the Single Market further, especially in the area of free movement of services, to speed up on the completion of the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union and implement a forward-looking reform of our Economic and Monetary Union. Moreover, we must strive to develop a well-functioning Single Market for retail financial services. For a well-functioning Economic and Monetary Union [EMU], economic convergence between Member States should be further stimulated and our fiscal policies aligned in a more effective way while considering further progress towards a European Monetary Fund.

Other goals include ‘a Health Union that brings true added-value for the Member States and operates in fields that cannot be covered by Member States alone’ and a digital tax as part of stronger own resources: ‘For the EU to act more effectively, the EPP Group intends to make significant progress on the European Union’s own resources, proposing the introduction of a basket of new sources of revenues for the EU, without increasing the overall tax burden on citizens.’

## PES / S&D

Next, we turn to the centre-left social democratic party family PES / S&D, which was the first of the three biggest political families studied here to outline its priorities in a position paper presented on 9 June 2020.<sup>71</sup> The paper reflects the position of the S&D Group – in the preface portrayed as ‘the most progressive and pro-European family’ in the Parliament – on the constitutional future of Europe. It also intends to offer a first contribution regarding the institutional dimension to the Conference on the Future of Europe. In the preface, S&D further notes that this exercise comes two decades after the launch of the last official debate on the future of Europe: European Council of Nice, 2000, followed in 2001 by the Laeken Declaration.

The S&D position paper has a lot in common with the EPP’s equivalent document, both regarding overall commitment to the European project and more specific institutional questions. However, S&D emphasises strongly the social

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<sup>71</sup> S&D Paper on the EU’s constitutional future: towards a stronger political union, [https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/publications/sd-paper-eus-constitutional-future-towards-stronger-political-union\\_9.6.2020](https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/publications/sd-paper-eus-constitutional-future-towards-stronger-political-union_9.6.2020); [https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/sites/default/files/2020-06/eu\\_constitutional\\_future\\_en\\_200609.pdf](https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/sites/default/files/2020-06/eu_constitutional_future_en_200609.pdf).

dimension of integration whilst devoting less space to CFSP / CSDP and other forms of EU's external action. It also uses the crises as a starting point for arguing that the EU needs to be reformed and strengthened. Without reforms, the EU will not be able to tackle future challenges. S&D is ready for Treaty change but sees that steps forward can also be taken in the current constitutional framework.

A deep debate on the revision of the treaties – after almost 20 years – can be envisioned: it is time to start by taking stock of the State of the Union as well as by finding solutions within the provisions of the existing treaties, as the EU constitutional structure is only half built but has shown to be unfit for dealing with important crisis (migration, Euro area, health).

This can be realized by making the best possible use of the planned Conference on the Future of Europe, but also by concentrating on the parts of the current Lisbon Treaty that still need to be fully exploited...

In terms of institutional reforms, S&D states that

The Conference should concentrate its reflections on the options about a possible deeper political integration of the EU and discuss the parliamentarisation of the Union, a strengthened right of legislative initiative, unanimity, qualified majority vote in Council on key policy fields such as foreign affairs, climate, energy, taxation, social policy, a stricter political control on the application of the rule of law. ... The above-outlined political goal of discussing the implementation of new and more advanced rights should orient the reflections of the Conference on the European Parliament's prerogatives, in line with the parliamentary tradition of the majority of Member States and with the goal of achieving a true European political system founded on the European parties.

S&D puts forward a list of its political priorities for the Conference:

- Full exploitation of the Lisbon Treaty to ensure the best execution of European policies, including the activation of *passerelle* clauses for extending Qualified Majority Voting in Council,
- Completion of the monetary union with the financial union and reform of the Stability and Growth Pact and of the mandate of the [European Central Bank] ECB,
- Constitutionalisation of new policies and competencies on social Europe, climate change and public Health Union,
- A stronger European budget backed by new own resources, including common taxation and more power for the EP on revenues,
- A stronger European Parliament: right of legislative initiative, full co-decision, stronger political control over the Commission,
- Substantial improvements in the transparency of the institutions, notably within the Council,

- Including the Social Progress Protocol and European Pillar of Social Rights in the event of Treaty changes,
- Permanent and structured forms of citizens' participation – based on gender and social balance – and new models of EU citizenship education,
- Improvement of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process,
- Introduction of transnational lists for the election of part of EP members, with rules that ensure the respect for balance between large, medium and small-sized Member States,
- Defence of the quality of democracy in the EU and in the functioning of the European Institutions as well as of the EU democratic project.

The S&D thus has a long 'shopping list' aiming at a major 'update' of the EU's institutional structure:

We believe our European constitutional framework requires an update on its contents (policies), resources, decision-making (procedures) and democratic legitimacy, thus resulting in a stronger, more perfect political union. These three dimensions are closely connected, since we realise that the implementation of our ambitious progressive agenda in the social and ecological fields depends also on more democratic and efficient decision-making at the European level.

Essentially the social democratic party family wants to strengthen supranational policymaking:

This process should aim at shifting the executive authority towards the Commission, which needs to be turned into the government of the EU. In this respect, more coherent and effective decision-making can also be fostered by making the [Commission's] composition more reflective of electoral outcomes, as well as by rebalancing the role of the European Council.

The Council's working methods should become more 'efficient and transparent, notably by respecting the provisions on the public deliberation of the Council and the publicity of Member States' positions,' while QMV should apply 'in all policies (own resources, taxation, foreign policy, social affairs, etc.), initially by activating the *passerelles* in the Lisbon Treaty'.

A further empowerment of the European Parliament is at the core of S&D's agenda: extending co-decision procedure to all legislation, the right of legislative initiative, stronger control of the Commission, and consolidation of budgetary powers. Here S&D makes historical references:

Given this environment, stronger European unity is a necessity, as a fully democratic Union of democratic states. Thus, the historic mission of building a sovereign European transnational democracy in the form of a parliamentary political union, as envisioned in the Ventotene Manifesto of 1941, is now more

valid than ever, by underlining the constitutive intertwining between EU and Member States and by developing true and clear multilevel governance.

S&D has also specific proposals concerning the political accountability of the Commission: full implementation of the Parliament's right of inquiry; detailed commitments set out in a renewed and enhanced framework agreement; the introduction of a periodic Question Time in the plenary; and introducing mechanisms to hold individual Commissioners to account. At the same time, S&D suggests further developing existing frameworks of inter-parliamentary cooperation and endowing national parliaments with the right of proposing initiatives to the European Parliament.

S&D is in favour of both the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and transnational lists:

Firstly, consolidating the Spitzenkandidaten process, in line with the Lisbon Treaty's provisions and based on the Parliament's requests to appoint as President of the Commission the candidate which can be backed by the majority of its component members. Secondly, by adding to this process an ambitious electoral reform that sets up once for all a pan-European constituency in the Union electing part of the EP Members, while taking into account the need to ensure geographical balance, particularly as regards the smaller member states. This could enhance the European dimension of EU elections, and strengthen the democratic life of the Union.

Regarding economic governance, S&D supports a 'real financial union', 'transnational redistribution' measures, and more budgetary resources. S&D has an ambitious agenda and recommends the establishment of several new institutions: a European treasury financed by common forms of taxation and empowered to issue Eurobonds; a potential Employment and Social Affairs (EPSCO) ministerial Euro Group besides the existing Financial Ministers' Euro Group; the Commissioner of Economics should act as the Euro Area Finance Minister and in this capacity, chair the Eurogroup; the European Stability Mechanism should be incorporated into the Treaties; and the MFF should be aligned to the duration of the EP mandate. The paper states that 'a key feature of any serious European Anticyclical Tool, avoiding the mistakes of the post-2008 aftermath, is a set of strong own resources for Europe, making public budgets and social safety nets stronger through raising revenues at EU level that could not be raised at national level'. Potential sources of revenue are 'a fraction of the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base, the Financial Transaction Tax, the digital tax, income from ETS/CO<sub>2</sub>, ECB profits, etc.'.

S&D argues for

raising the 'constitutional' profile of the European Pillar of Social Rights, approved by the European Social Summit of November 2017 through a 'Solemn Proclamation.'. The S&D Group should call unequivocally for the Pillar to be

integrated within Treaty provisions and to include all new and more advanced rights as defined in the Pillar, including a gender approach, with the goal of rebalancing the social and health dimension.’

The S&D also calls for a ‘public health union’ as

a key component part of vision for a Social Europe, together with the introduction of a European System of Minimum Wages and decent minimum old age pension as well as with a European Unemployment Benefit Scheme, and with a strengthened common framework for the reception and integration of refugees and migrants into the increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural European society.

### ALDE / Renew Europe

The centrist liberal party family is numerically much weaker than the EPP and the PES. Liberals have considerably less heads of national governments in the European Council and MEPs. Yet, in particular the liberal group in the Parliament has throughout the history of integration been unequivocally in favour of a stronger Europe. And, given that the liberals are ideologically sandwiched between EPP and PES on the left–right dimension, they have also often wielded more influence than their size would indicate.

For the liberals we rely on two documents. The Renew Europe’s position paper from spring 2021 addresses priorities for the Conference.<sup>72</sup> However, the document focused very much on policies and values without more detailed objectives regarding institutional questions. Hence, we also include a second document, ‘A liberal vision for the Future of Europe’, adopted in the autumn of 2021.<sup>73</sup> At the outset, the former document notes how the Renew Europe, ‘dedicated pro-Europeans’, ‘campaigned for the setting up of the Conference on the Future of Europe’. It also highlights the Conference as an opportunity for strengthening and democratising the Union. Like the other position papers, this one also emphasises the role of citizens and their active involvement.

On democracy, Renew Europe is in line with EPP and S&D in calling for greater involvement of the European Parliament:

Renew Europe believes that fostering transparency of EU decision making and democratic legitimacy is fundamental to regain trust in the Union and to promote citizens’ involvement in shaping EU policies. We pledge for substantial changes to enable better democratic control of the decisions made by the national governments within the Council and we support strengthening European democracy by having genuine European elections, with candidates that campaign

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<sup>72</sup> Renew Europe, Reshaping our future together. Priorities for the Conference on the Future of Europe, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> See [https://www.aldeparty.eu/cofoe\\_alde\\_party\\_policy](https://www.aldeparty.eu/cofoe_alde_party_policy).



through European political parties on transnational lists in a joint European constituency. Reinforcing the concept of European citizenship and, finally completing the Parliament's right of legislative initiative, are also direct tools to improve democratic legitimacy and participation.

The document 'A liberal vision for the Future of Europe' lists several goals:

- A single European Parliament seat in Brussels, with the power to initiate legislation and remove individual Commissioners.
- Harmonisation of EU Member States' laws for European Parliament elections.
- Introduction of transnational lists.
- Reduction of the number of EU Commissioners to 18, nominated by the European Commission President-elect.
- Strengthening of the involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs.
- Launch a Convention on the Future of Europe to implement the conclusions of the Conference and lay the foundation for a European Constitution.

From these objectives we can infer considerable similarity with the positions of EPP and S&D. Importantly, the final point concerns time beyond the Conference, the conclusions of which should be used as a starting point for drafting a proper EU constitution. This readiness for Treaty change is another factor in common with EPP and social democrats. Transnational lists are supported, but there is no mention of the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism.

Throughout the document, Renew Europe places a lot of emphasis on companies, entrepreneurship, individual rights, as well as emphasising the rule of law principle. The further development of the single market and EMU is deemed as important, with investments in research and innovation and creating a 'true common, borderless, digital European ecosystem'. Like EPP and S&D, Renew Europe also supports a 'European Health Union'. However, the liberals do not really present any institutional reforms in economic governance beyond arguing that the EP should have a stronger say in economic and monetary policy, including improved accountability of the ECB through an inter-institutional agreement. On the budget, Renew Europe calls for 'higher resources', including new own sources of revenue, and again a stronger role for the Parliament:

we shall strengthen the efficiency of the legislative decision making as well as democratic legitimacy and accountability of the Union budget and its own resources by granting the European Parliament enhanced competences and a more active role in the monitoring of the implementation of the own resources system. We therefore call for a deep review of the design and the adoption process of the EU budget, including a discussion on the possibility of approving the MFF through co-decision, within the framework of the Conference for the Future Europe.

Regarding external relations, Renew Europe envisions streamlined decision-making:

The EU must move towards [QMV] in foreign policy. As a first step, the passerelle clause, article 31 (3) TEU, should be put in force. QMV should be expanded to other areas of CFSP decision-making as well, with a particular focus on human rights. Furthermore, there should be a clear division of tasks between the Commission President, the Council President and the [High Representative], in which the latter should get a stronger mandate to act combined with a strengthened role for the European Parliament to increase the democratic oversight in foreign policy matters.

Renew Europe also supports a ‘real European Defence Union’, and as ‘European Defence is advancing, a formal Defence Council should also be put in place, as the proper forum for discussion at Council level. By analogy, a fully-fledged Security and Defence Committee should be set up in the European Parliament to make sure that the European citizens’ voices are properly reflected’. The document ‘A liberal vision for the Future of Europe’ includes several concrete goals: institutionally reinforcing the European External Action Service and the High Representative of the EU, who should act as an EU Foreign Minister; a European seat in the UN Security Council and other organisations; QMV for decisions on foreign and security policies; and the establishment and implementation of the European Defence Union subject to parliamentary control.

### Comparing the party families

Having analysed the position papers of the three main European party families, Table 2 summarises the main findings. The first point to note is the readiness for Treaty change, which stands in contrast to the positions of the majority of national governments – although there are signs that this might be changing as both France and Germany have recently called for revisions to the Treaties. In fact, the Europarties tend to see the Conference as a kind of sounding board and platform for proper Treaty reform resulting in a European constitution.

**Table 2 Comparing the positions of the EPP / EPP Group, PES / S&D, and ALDE / Renew Europe for the Conference on the Future of Europe**

	<b>EPP / EPP Group</b>	<b>PES / S&amp;D</b>	<b>ALDE / Renew Europe</b>
<b>Treaty change</b>	For	For	For
<b>Parliament</b>	Full legislative powers  The right to initiate, amend and repeal any European legislation in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure	Right of legislative initiative  Full co-decision powers	Right of legislative initiative  Single EP seat in Brussels
<b>Commission</b>	More accountability to the EP through right of inquiry  The possibility to impeach single Commissioners  A constructive motion of no-confidence, allowing the EP to choose the new Commission President with an absolute majority  Commission based on a concrete coalition agreement	The Commission should become an EU government  Composition should be more reflective of electoral outcomes  Full implementation of the EP's right of inquiry  Introducing mechanisms to hold individual Commissioners to account	Reducing the number of Commissioners to 18, nominated by the Commission President-elect  The EP should have the right to remove individual Commissioners
<b>Europarties</b>	Reform of the party law at European level  Allowing the Commissioners to hold functions in their respective parties	'Achieving a true European political system founded on the European parties'	
<b>Spitzen-kandidaten</b>	The 'biggest party has the first choice' rule  Commissioners could simultaneously serve as MEPs	Consolidating the Spitzenkandidaten process, based on the Parliament's requests to appoint as Commission President the candidate who is backed by the majority of MEPs	
<b>Transnational lists</b>	Against, as such EU-wide lists would undermine territorial representation and be disadvantageous to candidates from smaller member states	Introduction of transnational lists for the election of some of the of MEPs, with rules that ensure the respect for balance between large, medium and small-sized member states	Introduction of transnational lists to have 'genuine European elections, with candidates that campaign through European political parties on transnational lists in a joint European constituency'

	<b>EPP / EPP Group</b>	<b>PES / S&amp;D</b>	<b>ALDE / Renew Europe</b>
<b>External action</b>	The EU's own military unit, with Joint Headquarters, that would report to a Defence Affairs Council and the EP	QMV should apply in all issue areas, foreign policy included	QMV in foreign policy  Stronger role for the Foreign Minister (High Representative) and the Parliament
	The post of a Defence Commissioner		A 'real European Defence Union', with a Defence Council and a Security and Defence Committee in the EP
	QMV should apply to all areas of external action		
	The EU should have a permanent seat in the UN Security Council		A European seat in the UN Security Council and other organisations
<b>Economic governance</b>	Completion of the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union	A 'real financial union', with 'transnational redistribution' measures	Stronger role for the EP, including improved control of ECB
	EMU reform, including progress towards a European Monetary Fund	Stronger budgetary resources and increased budgetary powers for the EP	'Higher resources', including new own sources of revenue
	Stronger resources: the introduction of a basket of new sources of revenues for the EU and full budgetary powers for the EP	A European treasury, Employment and Social Affairs ministerial Euro Group, the Commissioner of Economics should act as the Euro Area Finance Minister and chair the Eurogroup	Approving the MFF through co-decision
	MFF should have the same time frame as the Parliament's mandate	MFF should have the same time frame as the Parliament's mandate	
<b>Other points</b>	Deepening the single market	Social Europe, including a European System of Minimum Wages, decent minimum old age pension, and a European Unemployment Benefit Scheme	Emphasis on companies and entrepreneurship and the further development of the Single Market
	Health Union		'European Health Union'
		Including the European Pillar of Social Rights in the Treaties	
		Public Health Union	

The Europarties do not directly call for major changes to the balance of power between EU institutions. S&D is the only one explicitly arguing that the Commission should become the government of the EU, although EPP Group mentions that the Commission should be based on a concrete coalition agreement. However, all three support considerably stronger competences for the Parliament: extending the co-decision procedure to all policy areas; the right of legislative initiative; increased budgetary powers and involvement in economic governance and external action; and improved control of the Commission, including the right to remove individual Commissioners. In the Council, the Europarties would like to see QMV applying to all issues. As a result, the Europarties agree about reinforcing both the role of the Parliament and the leadership capacity of the Commission – thus signalling their clear support for strengthening the supranational elements in EU decision-making.

The position papers of the EPP Group and S&D contain only short remarks regarding Europarties, but obviously the empowerment of the Parliament as well as the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism and transnational lists would elevate their status in EU governance. The EPP Group and S&D support the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, while S&D and Renew Europe are in favour of transnational lists while the EPP is against. Therefore, we again find the European-level partisan actors pushing for reforms that do not enjoy similar support among the governments of the member states.

Turning to external action, we note strong convergence as all three Europarties envision the EU becoming a stronger and more independent actor on a global stage. This requires more efficient decision-making, with the EPP Group and Renew Europe, in particular, putting forward concrete proposals for institutional reforms. The EPP Group, S&D and Renew Europe also champion stronger institutions and democratic accountability in economic governance. On the budget they all recognise the need for stronger resources and new sources of revenue. Interestingly, they argue that the current seven-year cycle of the MFF should have the same time frame as the Parliament's five-year mandate. This reform would certainly streamline budgetary rules and potentially make the EU's budget a more important part of the campaigns in European elections.

Overall, as expected there are striking similarities between the position papers. This applies to institutional questions as well as policy issues. To be sure, there are also differences stemming from the ideological backgrounds of the political families. The social democrats emphasise a 'social Europe', while EPP and liberals devote more space to reforming and deepening the single market. Referring to the crises, they all argue that the EU needs stronger institutions and more policy competences. Without such reforms, the EU fails to provide leadership in tackling the challenges. In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is not surprising to find the political parties and groups at European level advocating a European health union.

## 5 Concluding discussion

This report confirms that European integration has an important transnational partisan dimension, a dimension too often neglected by media as the spotlight is on national governments. Even IGCs have a strong partisan dimension, even though member states are the masters of the treaties. The partisan dimension involves the cross-border interaction of political parties that have over the decades – along with the deepening of integration itself – developed and consolidated their networks that bring together European and national level politicians from across the EU and beyond. Our report thus provides further evidence of how Europarties and their EP groups shape the agenda and debates at the European level, debates that will also have direct consequences for the division of competencies between the EU and its member states.

Our analysis focused on the largest political families – the centre-right EPP, the social democratic PES / S&D, and the liberal ALDE / Renew Europe. The reason was simple: these party families have been at the heart of European party politics for decades, with, for example, coalition-building in the European Parliament based on cooperation between EPP and S&D. These three political families have been staunch and proud supporters of European integration from the beginning, and this report shows that they continue to advocate a stronger and more supranational EU, both in terms of policies and institutions. Connecting our findings to the agenda-setting literature, we see these partisan actors justifying their pro-integrationist positions with both the crises of the 2010s and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Framing their positions with keywords such as ‘democracy’, ‘citizens’, and ‘transparency’, as well as almost deploying doomsday terminology, the Europarties and EP groups argue that without reforms the EU and its member states will fail to tackle future challenges. Understandably, the Europarties are also concerned about the future of the integration itself. Here we must remember that concerns about the democratic deficit and legitimacy of European integration have been key drivers behind the increased powers of the EP (Rittberger 2005).

Another connection to agenda-setting literature comes from venue shopping and from the interests of the actual stakeholders. The EP groups in particular did their best to make the Conference more supranational, and they succeeded, at least partially, as the format of the Conference is very much in line with the vision of the Parliament. And while the Conference should proceed ‘without taboos’, the partisan actors outlined clear objectives before it was even launched, objectives which include the strengthening of the Parliament and the Commission, support for the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism and transnational lists (although not by the EPP), extending QMV to all issues in the Council, and in general further empowerment of the EU through new and bigger resources, speaking

with one voice in external relations, and deepening economic integration. The convergence between the three political families is striking, and obviously is facilitated by their continuous interaction in the framework of EU institutions.

Our report also shows how the partisan actors have developed their own transnational networks that bring together MEPs, Commissioners, political foundations, various interest groups, youth and women's branches of the Europarties, as well as national member parties and MPs. The networks essentially consist of full-time politicians and party staff, but also grassroots party activists are involved, although their role appears very limited. This applied also to the preparatory phases of the Conference, which itself is of course dedicated to listening to the European citizens. Clearly the Europarties could do so much more in terms of connecting with grassroots supporters. This would add an important dimension to the already existing European or transnational civil society, where in particular a variety of sectoral interest groups and issue-based civic associations coordinate their activities and unite individuals from across the EU. But perhaps the main problem is the attitude of national parties that far too seldom involve their members in processes related to EU decision-making even though they have, at the same time, and no doubt motivated by diminishing numbers of members, delegated decision-making rights to ordinary members, for example regarding leadership selection (e.g. Scarrow 2015; van Haute and Gauja 2015). National parties have also often been against giving individual members stronger rights inside the Europarties. National parties thus remain primarily national organisations, also in terms of identity, and this stands in the way of the further development of Europarties.

EP groups in turn have considerably stronger resources and also benefit from daily work in the Parliament, which includes regular interaction with the Commission and European-level voters as well as voters. Our analysis illustrated how these EP groups particularly are on their 'home turf' in inter-institutional bargaining. These types of processes are 'business as usual' for the Parliament and its main groups, and, referring to values such as democracy and representation, they have proven successful in proactively shaping the agenda of inter-institutional reforms. As one of our interviewees explained, Europarties become more prominent in intergovernmental processes (such as IGCs), while in supranational, inter-institutional bargaining the EP groups are strongly engaged. In relation to the Conference the EP groups are much more centrally involved than the actual Europarties. However, if the Conference is followed by a constitutional convention and especially an IGC, then Europarties will mobilise the entire network, including party and particularly government leaders.

Inside the Parliament the usual pattern of coalition-building was evident, with the pro-EU centre-left, centrist, and centre-right political groups aligning together, with the Eurosceptics opposing the positions. Parliamentary unity should facilitate bargaining success vis-à-vis the other EU institutions, while

the strong presence of political group chairs signals that the issue is of high salience for the EP. Within the Parliament the EPP Group, S&D, and Renew Europe worked together in guiding the preparations for the Conference from the initial working group to AFCO and the plenary resolution. Inside the groups it is easy to identify key personalities: group chairs and vice-chairs or otherwise seasoned veterans of institutional questions – individuals that often also hold key important positions inside the Europarties. Hence, during constitutional reform processes the balance of power shifts towards group leaders, unlike in normal legislation where particularly rapporteurs and MEPs seated on the respective committees are influential in shaping group positions.

Future research should focus on the smaller Europarties and EP groups. Prime ministers or presidents seldom come from such parties, and hence they do not organise themselves around European Council meetings the same way as EPP, PES or ALDE. Overall, their Europarty structures tend to be looser and less institutionalised. In the Parliament these party groups have either chosen to cooperate with the mainstream groups or have voted against them. Particularly the Eurosceptic groups have tended to favour the latter alternative, voicing their opposition to the adopted measures or using the Parliament and the job of an MEP primarily as a platform for providing information about the EU (and its failures) to their electorates (Brack 2018; McDonnell and Werner 2020). Lacking the partisan networks and experience as well as the sheer numerical influence that EPP, PES, and ALDE possess, it is probable that these smaller Europarties and EP groups remain much more on the fringes of EU level constitutional reform processes, although our analysis did show that MEPs from such groups contributed actively to the debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe in the Parliament.

To conclude, our report builds on existing scholarship and has presented new findings through examining partisan interactive dynamics regarding the Conference on the Future of Europe. Besides advancing knowledge of the strategies and organisation of the Europarties and EP groups, our results have important implications for research on agenda-setting, transnational cooperation and European-level political parties and groups. There is a need to explore horizontal party-political links between the various EU institutions, as existing research has mainly focused on the European Council and Treaty reforms (Lindberg et al. 2008; Mühlböck 2017). We encourage students of EU governance to pay particular attention to the agenda-setting phase and how Europarties shape the subsequent decisions. Our analysis has shown how the Europarties and their EP groups as well as the political foundations operate very much in sync, with regular and informal interaction in Brussels. The Europarties and their political groups in the EP are inextricably linked, but further research is needed to uncover how they work together in particular policy issues.

Our final remarks concern the legitimacy and visibility of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Even before the Conference was launched, it attracted strong



criticism on the grounds of being too top-down and elitist, with particularly civil society actors calling for genuine dialogue with citizens.<sup>74</sup> Returning to the three types of agendas outlined in the theoretical section, there is no evidence of the public finding the Conference salient, as most Europeans, including politically active ones, have probably not even heard of it, national medias have covered the Conference only very sporadically if at all, and thus it is an issue belonging to the agenda of political decision-makers. Again, it would be unfair to blame the EU, as the European-level actors can only do so much in terms of reaching European citizens. The Conference lasts until late spring 2022, and when completed could eventually turn into a Treaty revision. Several national governments are against it, but momentum is nonetheless building up for Treaty change. The French EU presidency's programme has the reform of the EU on the agenda. So does the new German federal government, which in its coalition agreement states that the Conference on the Future of Europe should be used for reforms, triggering 'necessary Treaty changes' through 'a constituent convention' and also lead to the further development of a European federal state.<sup>75</sup> The German government also wants to strengthen the EP, for example with regard to the right of initiative, and supports a uniform European electoral law with partly transnational lists and a binding *Spitzenkandidaten* system. Here, it is worth noting that French and German politicians are also key players inside the three political families analysed in this report. Subsequent research should thus analyse the impact of the partisan actors on the final outcome of the Conference.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Recommendations for a successful and effective Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://ecas.org/recommendations-for-a-successful-and-effective-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>, 18.12.2019; Alberto Alemanno, The EU won't fix its democratic deficit with another top-down 'conference', <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/21/eu-democratic-deficit-top-down-conference-verhofstadt>, 21.1.2020; The Conference on the Future of Europe: an Open Letter, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-an-open-letter/>, 1.2.2020; 'Top-down' future of Europe conference 'will fail' warning, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/147431>, 13.2.2020; Future of Europe conference: one year on standby, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/150431>, 21.12.2020.

<sup>75</sup> Available at [https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag\\_2021-2025.pdf](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, under the topic 'European Democracy' on the multilingual digital platform of the Conference, the most endorsed ideas were 'A reform plan for a citizen-based European Democracy', 'Stronger together: A democratic European Federation', and 'Truly European elections: Transnational EU-wide electoral lists', thus suggesting that Euromy party activists may have contributed to the online debates. See <https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/Democracy/f/6/>.

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# Svensk sammanfattning

Konferensen om Europas framtid är ett unikt deliberativt experiment som vänder sig till medborgare i hela Europeiska unionen (EU) för att diskutera dess framtid. Samtidigt leds konferensen av EU-institutioner varav särskilt Europaparlamentet (EP) stöder konferensen betydligt mer än de flesta nationella regeringar. Även om konferensen är utformad som ett nedifrån-och-upp-forum för att lyssna på medborgarna erbjuder Europapartierna och deras EP-grupper en möjlighet att både ha ett utbyte med sina sympatisörer och forma konferensens dagordning och debatter.

Denna rapport undersöker hur framgångsrika de tre största politiska familjerna eller Europapartierna – mitten-högerpartiet Europeiska folkpartiet (EPP), mitten-vänsterpartiet Europeiska socialdemokratiska partiet (PES), mittenpartiet Alliansen liberaler och demokrater för Europa (ALDE) och deras partigrupper i EP – har varit med att utforma konferensens agenda och debatter. Rapporten tar upp tre huvudsakliga forskningsfrågor. För det första utforskar den vägarna och strategierna genom vilka Europapartierna och EP-grupperna har försökt påverka konferensen: koalitionsbygge i parlamentet och kopplingar till kommissionen, nationella medlemspartier och europeiska politiska stiftelser som är knutna till Europapartierna. För det andra analyserar den arbetsfördelningen eller maktbalansen mellan och inom Europapartier och deras EP-grupper med anknytning till konferensen. För det tredje bedömer den prioriteringarna för dessa partiaktörer för konferensen. På ett mer normativt plan diskuterar den huruvida ”politiska partier på europeisk nivå bidrar till att skapa ett europeiskt politiskt medvetande och till att uttrycka unionsmedborgarnas vilja”, som det beskrivs i EU-fördragen, genom att undersöka om Europapartierna ”nådde ut” till medborgarna eller åtminstone till sina egna enskilda medlemmar före och under konferensen. Studien ökar därför den vetenskapliga förståelsen av själva konferensen, samtidigt som särskild uppmärksamhet ägnas åt Europapartiernas och deras EP-gruppers strategier och interna organisation.

Den teoretiska ramen för rapporten fokuserar på betydelsen av dagordningsmakt (”agenda-setting”) i EU:s politik och på Europapartiernas och EP-gruppernas strategier i tidigare omgångar av konstitutionella reformer. Den empiriska analysen, med utgångspunkt i intervjuer och dokument, är uppdelad i tre delar. Den första undersöker de interinstitutionella förhandlingarna inför konferensen, den andra granskar Europapartiernas och EP-gruppernas handlande och strategier före och under konferensen, medan den tredje analyserar de överstatliga partipolitiska aktörernas ståndpunkter under konferensen. Intervjupersonerna kom från Europapartiernas och EP-gruppernas kontor samt från parlamentet och de politiska stiftelserna. Intervjuerna var semistrukturerade och genomfördes mellan våren 2020 och början av 2022. Genom intervjuerna visar vi tydligt hur

Europapartierna och EP-grupperna har försökt forma konferensen. Dokument består av ståndpunktsdokument, resolutioner, pressmeddelanden och annat material som producerats av EU:s institutioner, Europapartier, medier och de politiska stiftelserna. Dokumentanalys gör det i sin tur möjligt för oss att förstå händelsernas ordningsföljd och huruvida Europapartiernas och EP-gruppernas ståndpunktsdokument har påverkat konferensens agenda och debatter. Rapporten identifierar också Europapartipolitiker och enskilda ledamöter av Europaparlamentet (MEP) som var aktiva och inflytelserika i förhållande till konferensen.

Resultaten visar hur konferensen, liksom EU i stort, har en viktig transnationell partipolitisk dimension. Europapartier och särskilt de resursstarka EP-grupperna, som drar nytta av årtionden av erfarenhet av fördragsreformer och interinstitutionella förhandlingar, lyckades forma såväl konferensens dagordning som debatter. Dessa överstatliga partipolitiska aktörer prioriterade tydligt frågor relaterade till EU:s demokrati och institutioner men visade mindre ansträngning att nå ut till medborgarna. I parlamentet byggde partigrupperna stora koalitioner bakom resolutioner, med gruppordförandena starkt närvarande i processen. Europapartier hade en betydligt mindre roll, medan de politiska stiftelserna var mycket aktiva genom att organisera evenemang och producera bakgrundsmaterial. Innehållsanalys avslöjar betydande likheter mellan Europapartiernas institutionella mål, även om skillnader också finns, till exempel när det gäller transnationella listor för val till Europaparlamentet. Det avslutande avsnittet sammanfattar resultaten och diskuterar hur vår studie bidrar till förståelsen av EU:s demokrati och Europapartiernas och EP-gruppernas roll i att forma Europas framtid.

“The results show how the Conference, like the EU in general, has an important transnational partisan dimension.”

Karl Magnus Johansson and Tapio Raunio



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