



The Conference on the Future of Europe: A Kaleidoscope of Democracy

December 2022

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Foreword

Jenny Kapellou

*Head of the Hanns Seidel
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George Pagoulatos

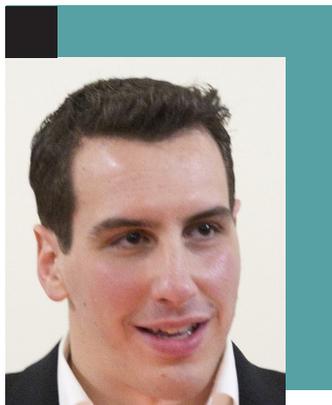
Director General, ELIAMEP

The Conference on the Future of Europe signaled the end of an ambitious deliberative process that aimed to revitalize democracy, in a period of political polarization and rising populism, in Europe and beyond. Citizens from all EU member-states joined forces to reflect upon the scope and pace of further European integration, bringing the EU closer to its core legitimizing principal, namely the European demos. Regardless of the final outcome that may have fallen short of many participants' expectations, the Conference showed the added value of a complementary deliberative dimension to the existing representative one in the EU democratic modus operandi. In this deliberative process, academics and members from organized civil society were actively engaged, offering their expertise in various formats and occasions. The Conference setting was like a democratic kaleidoscope, enabling the expression of an endless variety of personal opinions and views on key aspects of European democratic governance. A tiny fraction of this variety is included in this publication that aims to keep the debate about the Conference alive.

Introduction

**Dr. Alexandros
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The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) has received extensive praise but also criticism for both its process and outcomes. Originally agreed by the Council of the European Union (EU), the European Commission and the European

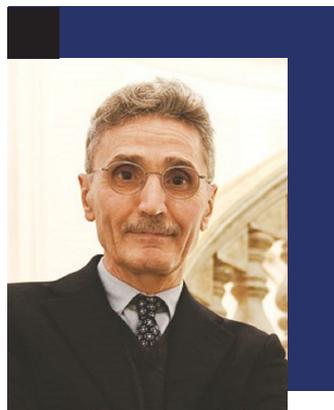
Parliament on March 2021, and concluded by May 2022, its primary purpose has been to allow EU citizens to participate more effectively in the EU's decision-making processes, thus also increasing democratic legitimacy at the EU level.

CoFoE has been a tremendously challenging and wide-encompassing undertaking, both in terms of its structure and also the subjects included. The overall aim has been to reinforce the deliberative character of the EU decision-making process, or at least to constitute a major first step towards that direction. Has this been achieved? And what have the implications been for both democratic governance at the EU level and the EU integration process more broadly?

The contributions to this publication stem from individuals belonging to two major and highly important groups of participants in CoFoE: academics and experts/leaders of civil society organizations. The contributors participated in different capacities in CoFoE, witnessing both its dynamism and the various setbacks that have been identified in the process. They offer their personal insights, answering a similar set of questions and giving their opinion into what CoFoE has meant for, and what its impact has been on, the EU. It is precisely the different capacities of each of the contributors that offers an inclusive and multi-perspective, multi-level approach to CoFoE. After all, these features have been at the core of CoFoE itself and characterize it as a unique EU-level deliberative activity.

Between deliberation and sovereignism

For discussing the future of Europe, let's start form your participation to CoFoE. What was your role in CoFoE?



Sergio Fabbrini

Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Intesa Sanpaolo Chair on European Governance and Head of the Political Science Department at LUISS Guido Carli in Rome

I was involved by the Draghi government, which set up a committee of experts. This Committee was headed by a previous Minister of Justice of Italy, Professor Paola Severino, and the former European Commissioner for Industry and Entrepreneurship and former Permanent Representative of Italy to the EU, Ambassador Ferdinando Nelli Feroci. The members of the Committee were experts, coming either from academia or public and private institutions. I received the task to lead the Committee's group on EU democracy. It was an interesting task, because Italy, during the Draghi government, was very much involved in European issues. Draghi was making Italy central in European politics. During his mandate as premier (between February 2021 and October 2022) Italy was probably one of the leading countries of the EU.

As a group, we tried to identify our contribution to the broader process of reforming the EU. I worked on the EU democracy from a European, not national, perspective (in coherence with my book, *Europe's Future: Decoupling and Reforming*, Cambridge University Press, 2019). I, and other members of the group, participated also in the CoFoE Plenary on democracy and rule of law, where the selected citizens raised technical and political questions regarding the reform of the EU. We concluded our work as Committee just as the political

situation in Italy changed dramatically. With the parliamentary elections of 25 September 2022, Italy moved from having a very pro-European government (the Draghi government) to having a government skeptical towards the EU (the Meloni government).

How do you think that CoFoE, as an EU-wide deliberative experiment, impacted on EU democracy and European integration?

CoFoE had an innovative character; it was a deliberative democracy experiment. This experiment allowed a selected group of citizens to deal with the complexity of the EU project (probably for the first time in their life). However, this experiment took place because of the stalemate between the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament, regarding the aims of the CoFoE. The three institutions had different, if not opposing, views on the mandate of CoFoE. Specifically, national governments were strongly against any serious discussion on the institutional structure of the EU and on possible amendments to the EU Treaties. Their mantra was – and is – well known: DELIVERY. According to them, the EU is legitimate if it delivers something. Of course, the EU should deliver, but it is a political system and not a service agency. Thus, from a democratic perspective, it is important also to answer the question, of how the EU delivers¹

The paralysis between the three institutions left CoFoE without clear indications from the top, which meant it had to start from the bottom. The discussions were extensive but erratic. Herein lies the ‘double-edged’ nature of deliberative democracy: on the one side, it gives citizens the chance to actively participate and to raise problems. On the other side, those problems are raised in a confusing way which leads away from their solution. There needs to be a clear agenda, if the possibilities of popular deliberation are to be maximized. Citizens cannot be aware of the specific policy-making features and institutional rules of the EU (such as the distribution of competences and nature of the treaties’ principles). Representatives should define the agenda, listen to the citizens, take the responsibility of making proposals, and then go back to the citizens submitting those proposals for their approval or disapproval. To celebrate the virtues of deliberative democracy, as several colleagues did and are doing, is wrong. It is a manifestation of academic populism, a sophisticated form of distrust towards representative democracy.

Let’s leave CoFoE and move instead to the political debate emerged in the EU since the pandemic. Which kind of divisions have emerged?

In responding to the COVID-19 the pandemic (epitomized by the approval of the EU Recovery Initiative), EU politics appeared to revolve around interstate cleavages, more than

political ones. Three coalitions of states emerged during and after the health crisis.²

First, there was a coalition of member states of the Eurozone, with France and Italy having an initial leadership role, later joined by Germany, asking the Commission to issue debt in the financial markets for supporting the post-pandemic recovery through grants and not only loans. It was certainly crucial that Germany changed its initial position against ‘EU debt’, since Germany is the pro-status quo country (a country intimately conservative). The French President Emmanuel Macron played an important role in persuading the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to change her position.

Second, there was the coalition of the northern Eurosceptic member states, led by The Netherlands, opposing any EU debt (the so-called frugal coalition). This coalition included Scandinavian states (Sweden, Denmark), but also Austria and later Finland. These member states are traditionally against the strengthening of the political character of the EU, and shared a reciprocal understanding of the EU prior to their joining the integration process, having been members of organizations of economic cooperation outside the EU single market.

Third, there was the coalition represented by Poland and Hungary, attracting the sympathies of other sovereigntist forces and leaders. I call them sovereigntists because, although they represent nationalistic views, they decided to operate within the EU (having considered the dramatic costs paid by the British nationalists for exiting)³. Sovereigntist governments exhibited specific characteristics that were defined in previous experiences of cooperation (for instance, in the so-called Visegrad Group). They openly refused the supranational logic of the EU, asking for strengthening the intergovernmental one (an outcome that contradicts the various streams of liberal or neo-intergovernmentalism still celebrating the positive role of the European Council, a narrative that has become dominant in EU studies). For them, supranationalism concerns not only the decision-making capacity of the European Commission or the European Parliament, but mainly the supremacy of EU law over national laws and constitutions. Thanks to the sovereigntists, the “intergovernmental union” (as I defined in my book, *Which European Union?* Cambridge University Press, 2015, a definition that has raised a lot of criticism) has been considerably strengthened. These governments were also in favor of policy repatriation, although they did not agree on the policies to repatriate. For western political leaders such as Matteo Salvini, Georgia Meloni, or Marine Le Pen, repatriation concerned mainly economic and monetary policy (which should no longer be under the control of the European Central Bank). Instead, for eastern political leaders, as Viktor Orbán, Mateusz Morawiecki, or Jarosław Kaczyński, repatriation meant the national control of

immigration, because immigrants brought a multiethnic threat to the pure national and Christian identity of their countries. In sum, during the pandemic, EU politics was characterized by divisions between states more than between political parties.

It might be of interest to follow what will happen in Italy. The outcome of 25 September 2022 elections led in fact to a government controlled by sovereignist parties (Brothers of Italy and League) and leaders (Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini). Will this government join the eastern sovereignist coalition? Italy is a member of the Eurozone, which is not the case for Poland and Hungary. One might even argue that sovereignist governments in Hungary and Poland managed to maintain power probably because they are outside the Eurozone. So, it will be an interesting experiment to see how a sovereignist government is going to operate within the most integrated regime of the EU, i.e., the Eurozone.

Could you discuss more the Italian experience with sovereignism? How is Meloni government behaving?

Regarding budgetary policy, the first choices made by the Meloni government seem to be in continuity with those of Draghi government, accepting to operate, for instance, within the terms negotiated by the previous government with the European Commission regarding the implementation of the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan. After all, Italy is the largest beneficiary of EU Recovery Initiative, standing to receive approximately 200 billion euros (larger than the Marshall plans after the Second World War). For the Meloni government, it would be a disaster not to get these funds. Moreover, because the support for this government comes primarily from the northern parts of Italy, which are more economically developed, I think it is impossible that this government will call into question the Italian participation in the Eurozone (as Meloni and Salvini did when they were in opposition). Even in relation to the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact, the Meloni government has remained relatively silent.

However, the Meloni government needs also to answer to its core electoral constituency, which expects “its” government to criticize the EU. That’s why it has turned attention to other policy areas, starting from immigration. Although there is no immigration emergency such as in 2015 and 2016, and there is no ‘invasion’ of immigrants, the Meloni government has immediately shown force, opposing the acceptance of 249 immigrants (and sending them to a French port). Just within few weeks, the public discourse in Italy has changed from discussing the price cap and controlling of the energy costs (the priorities for the Draghi government) to discussing the accommodation of a few hundreds of immigrants (in a country of 63 million inhabitants). This change of public discourse allowed the

Meloni government to advocate Italian sovereignty and the protection of Italy’s borders and territory. In other words, I expect Giorgia Meloni to make noise in symbolic politics and to be silent in budgetary policies (to avoid repeating the mistakes of Liz Truss course of action in the United Kingdom). But I am not sure this double-speaking approach could last for long.

Could you discuss more in depth the differences between sovereignists and nationalists?

My argument is that there has been a transformation of European nationalism after 2016. The BREXIT referendum in June 2016 was a celebration of nationalism as independence. From the 1957 Rome Treaties to the 2016 British referendum, the political division in Europe was between Europeanists, favoring integration and interdependence, and nationalists, opposing integration in favor of national independence. But the costs of BREXIT, even in the United Kingdom, have been so high that nationalist leaders and parties have been obliged to reframe their rhetoric, moving away from exiting the EU to criticizing it from within. What you have is a nationalism that no longer advances an independencebased discourse, but that is ‘obliged’ to operate within the EU. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has made this necessity even more compelling. What would Poland do outside the EU? The most interesting aspect of the transformation of the nationalist discourse, both academically and politically, is that nationalists try to endogenize nationalism within European integration. Sovereignism epitomizes the attempt to make compatible two concepts that are traditionally incompatible: nationalism and EU integration. That is why I proposed calling this transformation ‘sovereignism’, in order to distinguish it from the traditional nationalistic position. Sovereignists accept the process of integration, but they interpret it as an exclusively intergovernmental project (in which the unanimity logic should remain the founding principle). They oppose EU supranationalism but not EU intergovernmentalism. All sovereignists asked for some policy repatriation, but, contrary to Brexiters, they support the integration of other policies at the same time. For instance, Polish and Hungarian sovereignists asked for disintegrating migration policy but keeping integrated structural funds policies or even promoting the development of a new, integrated defense policy. Italian and French sovereignists ask for repatriating economic and monetary competences but asked for more integration in migration policy. Unlike the Tory party in the UK who was against the EU and its policies, sovereignists are in favor of a policy ‘cherry-picking’ approach.

If that is the case, what would it be the outcome?

The sovereignist position would lead to the differentiated disintegration of the EU, which is the other face of the process of differentiated integration. Many EU studies scholars, who

celebrate the virtues of EU differentiated integration, seem to be unaware of the other (dark) side of differentiation. The same happened with the theory of constitutional pluralism, celebrated for long by many EU studies scholars as the highest expression of EU democracy, and now used by Orbán, and Morawiecki for destroying EU democracy. Fortunately, sovereignists do not know how to resolve their collective action problem. In fact, the policies sovereignists want to disintegrate differ from one sovereignist government or leader to another. Sovereignists do not claim the disintegration of the same policy areas across the EU. They evoke a “Europe of nations” vision but de facto point to a “Europe à la carte”, where each sovereigntist government can get out of some policies and remain in other policies. Of course, not only can the EU not function in the context of a nationally differentiated disintegration, but its democratic aspirations would be cancelled by a process of nationally differentiated disintegration.

In this context, how do you interpret the war in Ukraine?

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has changed the very structure on which Europe (EU and its member states) has been built during the post-Cold War era. The war in Ukraine has triggered a crisis which is “constitutive” and not “distributive” (as the sovereign debt and migration crises of the first half of the 2010s). A crisis is constitutive when it questions the predominant growth model, as well as the predominant public policy paradigm, whereas a crisis is distributive when the conflict takes place within the two predominant models. The war in Ukraine, with its consequences on energy and security, goes to the roots of the European success. Think of Germany. After the end of the Cold War, the political and economic elites of the country based its industrial success on low cost imported Russian gas and competitive exports of goods to the Chinese market, benefitting, in addition, from American taxpayers who continued to pay for the continent’s security (an incredible example of free riding). The conditions for pursuing this model are no longer there. Certainly, to these challenges, the Scholz government is reacting through unilateral, if not nationalistic, policies (assuming that “what is good for Germany is good for Europe”). Certainly, in Brussels, there is an institutional inertia in favor of the “muddling through” approach. Certainly, several national governments are thinking to their own small national interests, preoccupied of only what will happen tomorrow morning. However, the depth of the crisis is such that none (member state or EU institution) can keep its head in the sand for long. The future is already here, and it will be difficult to escape from it.

We arrived to where we started: how do you see the future of the future of Europe?

As I said, CoFoE was an interesting exercise but politically ineffective. True, the majority of citizens involved in the CoFoE

asked for “more Europe”, but what does “more Europe” mean? Not only politicians, but also EU studies’ scholars, have come to consider the finality’s question irrelevant. Their attention focused entirely on processes, functions, negotiations, deals, with differentiation become the new orthodoxy. Indeed, the interstate divisions discussed before showed the inadequacy of the EU institutional structure and public policy model (which stresses only the responsibility of the single member state for dealing with collective problems). Facing a structural challenge, it should be necessary to make structural choices. Both materially and politically. Materially, it is necessary to redefine our growth model no longer in terms of dependency on autocratic regimes, nor on the benevolence of the United States. Politically, it is necessary to acknowledge that the EU “as it is” cannot pursue the necessary structural choices. Facing the paralysis of the unanimity logic, the most “willing and able” countries (certainly, a majority of the Eurozone) should set up a Political Compact outside the EU. A Political Compact which gives to the EU, as an organization distinct from its member states, a sovereignty (although limited) in those crucial policies (such as fiscal policy, military policy, security policy) that would help the EU to protect its interests and values. That’s why it is necessary to talk about finalité of the integration process. In my work (since *Compound Democracies*, Oxford University Press 2007 and 2010), I tried to show that a union of previously independent states should adopt a federal method for aggregating as a federal union (and not federal state). It is necessary to reintroduce, not only in the political debate but also in the academic debate, a federalist perspective, abandoning the parochial idea that the EU is a sui generis experiment. The future of Europe depends also on our capacity, as scholars, to identify the right questions that representatives and citizens should then answer.

NOTES

- 1 I discussed this issue in a paper with John Erik Fossum, Magdalena Gora and Guntram Wolff, ‘Conference on the Future of Europe Vehicle for reform or forum for reflection?’, Policy Brief, No. 1, May 2021, EU3D, [eu3d-policy-brief-1- may-2021.pdf \(uio.no\)](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4118801)
- 2 ‘Going beyond the pandemic: ‘next generation eu’ and the politics of sub-regional coalitions’, *Comparative European Politics*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00302-8>.
- 3 I worked on the transformation of nationalism with a LUISS team, see the article written with Tiziano Zgaga) ‘Sovereignism and Its Implications: The Differentiated Disintegration of the European Union’, EU3D Research Paper, no. 22, May 2022, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4118801

A Critical Juncture to Strengthen Democratic Resilience

What has been your role in or involvement with the CoFoE?

I was very excited to participate in CoFoE, in a number of different capacities, since I believe that this was a unique democratic experiment, and also because of my work on transnational democracy within the EU for 30 years now.

I was asked to contribute as an expert in two sessions of the European Citizens' Panel "European democracy / Values and rights, rule of law, security," including the last session at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence between 10 and 12 December 2021. I also provided support to EUI as a host institution, this being a very important moment since this was when the Panel finalized their recommendations².

In addition, I, along with Alberto Alemanno and Niccolò Milanese, chaired the EUI Democracy Forum during this past 1.5 years. The Forum has brought together members from civil society, EU institutions, as well as academics, to follow the conference and provide constructive criticism.



Kalypso Nicolaidis¹

Chair in Global Affairs at the School of Transnational Governance at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence.

How do you think that CoFoE impacted EU democracy?

I do believe that CoFoE was a critical juncture in the road to developing a European public sphere in which people can

connect in a variety of ways, including through social or other media but also traditionally through, for example, music festivals or art-related events, across different countries. There are more and more initiatives in the spirit of my proposal in the last constitutional convention for a 'Woodstock of European politics', such as, for instance, the Transeuropa Festival organised by European Alternatives.

A European public sphere is a prerequisite for European democracy to function properly on the basis of at least two dimensions. First, it must be a living, organic process as people learn to discuss shared or conflicting issues with others across national, social, etc., contexts.

Second, a public sphere must also exist in our collective imaginary. Modern democracy is the magical moment when a people imagines itself as the author of its own destiny, having finally stolen this mantle of supreme authority from gods and princes. The European public must recognize a European public sphere as a European public sphere; a truly democratic commons, the locus of publicness in Europe, and open to the rest of the world. I refer to European 'demoicracy', to convey this idea that European democracy needs to be imagined as a constellation of horizontal connections between citizens across borders and across overlapping national, regional or urban public space. A very difficult ideal to operationalize however, given linguistic, cultural, social, etc., differences between the different peoples of Europe.

Given the above, I believe that CoFoE is an important step towards the development of such a European public sphere given its interlocking modes of horizontal deliberation on a digital platform, through citizens assemblies and in mixed assemblies or so-called plenaries. But I also feel it is an imperative need to reverse our democratic gaze³ and learn from existing experiments. For example, CoFoE's Digital Platform (which is being revamped post CoFoE) draws on the Municipality of Barcelona's Decidim⁴ in Spain. CoFoE's Citizens' Panels, and other elements of it, will, hopefully, constitute the seed for enhancing European (deliberative) democracy in the EU, as we have started to see with the Commission-based citizens panels in 2022 and 2023. But we must remain vigilant so that these renewed initiatives don't end up as a box-ticking exercise.

Where do you think the EU will move towards in terms of democratic governance, and where would you like to see it moving towards?

Democracy can be seen as a constant and fluid balancing act between three different forces: the views of the many, which need to be aggregated and made into common actions and policies; the agonism that differences create in policy-making; and what we may call stubborn pluralism which means that societ-

ies constantly need to find civilized and creative ways to agree to disagree. An equilibrium needs to be constantly created and recreated between these three forces.

The unstable character of this balancing act is exacerbated at the EU level, which is one of the main reasons it has suffered some form of crisis in its democratic governance since its creation. Transnational democracy needs constantly to adapt not only to the expectations, but also to the political cultures, of people of different nationalities and traditions, as well as to the ever-changing global environment. It is about creating an overlapping consensus à la Rawls between partially pre-existing overlapping consensuses. This is a 'tall order'.

Despite this on-going crisis mode, there are differences across time. Today's crisis stems from the very roots of the democratic governance issue of the EU: EU integration has progressed not through democratic decision-making but through politicians who, albeit elected, maintained a mostly bureaucratic attitude, and with little accountability to EU citizens.

The latter should be combined with the fact that EU policy-making increasingly concerns sensitive, redistributive, national policy areas (financial policy, immigration policy, etc.), as well as citizens' changing expectations. But I believe that transnational democratic renewal will only overcome the 'polycrisis' if it involves radically enhanced accountability and creative new ways of engineering citizen participation.

For example, we need much more transparency in the distribution of the EU Recovery Initiative⁵ funds through what I have called a 'democratic panopticon'⁶. The Council and the European Parliament must also reinforce this polycentric democratic governance framework; especially the Parliament as the foundational democratic representative institution in the EU. In the Internet age of today, the above are not only more crucial, but entirely and easily feasible.

In my recent work⁷ with Alberto Alemanno, we argued for the idea of an EU 'democratic ecosystem' that would crowdsource "...the relevant historical wisdom, experiences and memories and merge that with the proliferation of new democratic practices in democratic societies to create something new at the European level." Needless to say that to 'trans-nationalise' democratic participation across the existing linguistic, societal, traditional, historic, etc., differences will require creative experimentation with new Artificial Intelligence and digital technologies – something we are involved in with a network of NGOs under the banner 'Power to the People.'

This democratic ecosystem is not just about legitimacy, but also efficiency, not just about responsive rule but about responsible

rule. There is much research demonstrating how collective intelligence and crowdsourcing of expertise most often enhances outcomes for all as demonstrated by existing experimentation with the allocation of EU cohesion and regional funds. Why not make further distribution of the funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, subject to the scrutiny of citizens assemblies?⁸ The ecosystem can rely on city and regional networks, as well as online networks and must start with a more systematic approach to democratic learning in schools, through everyday participatory practices.

We should stop asking whether the EU is a democracy and start examining new ways to enrich and strengthen its democratic resilience. Arguably deliberative democracy offers the double promise of pushing back against corruption and state capture and dampening polarization within and across countries⁹. If this is the case, we could very well imagine the creation of a fourth branch of government at EU level through a permanent citizens' assembly¹⁰. After all, the ecosystem does not include only formal politics, but rather informal activism, such as civil society organizations, protests, local engagement, and other bottom-up approaches¹¹. These various spheres can interact with one another and evolve organically, without legalistic grand design, through more ad-hoc, liquid and innovative processes: an ecosystem, constantly evolving, growing and delivering new roots and branches of political life across the continent.

NOTES

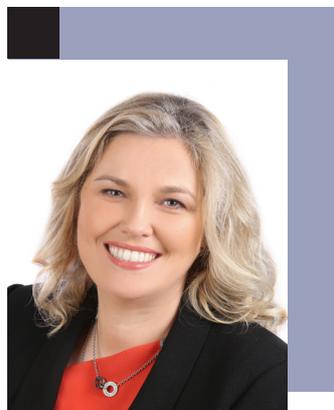
- 1 This contribution is based on the interview given at EURACTIV <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/interview/eleonora-co-%20foe-should-become-permanent-exercise-in-to-eu-legislative-process/>
- 2 The recommendations can be found at the Report of Session 3 of the Panel at: https://futureu.europa.eu/en/assemblies/citizens-panels/f/299/posts?assembly_slug=citizens-panels&-component_id=299&locale=en
- 3 From "Reversing the Democratic Gaze" with Richard Youngs November 2021, Carnegie Europe, <https://carnegie-ieeeurope.eu/2021/11/24/reversing-democratic-gaze-pub-85840>.
- 4 More on "Will the new COFOE digital platform live up to its promise? From Barcelona to Brussels and back" with Petar Markovic, April 2021, EU Transnational Democracy Blog, <https://blogs.eui.eu/transnational-democracy/from-barcelona-to-brussels-and-back/>.

- 5 Regulation 2020/2094.
- 6 More at Noema Magazine <https://www.noemamag.com/the-democratic-panopticon/>
- 7 "Citizen Power Europe," December 2021, n A. Alemanno and P. Sellal, The Groundwork of European Power, RED (Revue Européenne du Droit), Issue 3, published by Groupe d'études géopolitiques, <https://gaia-x.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/RED-3-The-Groundwork-of-European-Power-December-2021-1.pdf>.
- 8 See my article "Once in a Lifetime? An Immanent Critique of the NextGeneration EU," 2022, Biblioteca della libertà 233: 1-9, DOI: 10.23827/BDL_2022_3. https://www.centro-inaudi.it/images/abook_file/FL-233-3-Nicolaidis.pdf
- 9 See my article "In Praise of Ambivalence: Another Brexit Story," 2020, Journal of European Integration, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1766456>
- 10 Such as Citizens Take over Europe <https://citizenstakeover.eu/>
- 11 See my article with Richard Youngs and Niccolo Milanese, "Informal Civil Society: A Booster for European Democracy?" 2022, Carnegie Europe, 23 March, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/03/23/informal-civil-society-booster-for-european-democracy-pub-86665>

Getting the Genie out of the Bottle

What has been your role in or involvement with the CoFoE?

Organizationally, the European Movement Ireland was the lead organization partnering with the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ireland on mapping out the national CoFoE discussions and strategy in Ireland, and we focused primarily on young people and minority groups who don't usually have their voices heard on European issues. The report that we developed formed the basis for the Irish national submission to the CoFoE.



Noelle O'Connell

*Chief Executive Officer,
European Movement Ireland*

Personally, in regard to my role, following a public and open competition, I applied, was selected, and appointed by the Irish government to be the Irish national citizens' representative, of which each member state had one. So, my role was to represent Ireland as the national citizens' representative, along with a number of randomly selected European citizens, four Members of Parliament of Ireland, and a number of Irish Members of the European Parliament. I participated in the Digital Transition Working Group and, of course, the Plenary.

What was your experience participating in CoFoE – what did you think of the process?

As I said in my concluding speech, it would be easy to be cynical, skeptical and dismissive of the entire process. But, not-

withstanding all the challenges and imperfections that were exacerbated by a global pandemic, the war in Ukraine, being the world's largest exercise in participatory democracy, CoFoE actually confounded its critics, in that it created a momentum and demonstrated a desire amongst citizens from across the EU to input and shape the direction, the form, and the type of the EU they want to live in. For me, it was a challenging experience – it was not easy, coming from a peripheral EU member state to travel to Strasbourg, there were long days and long plenaries, there was a lot of work in the Working Groups – and a big commitment to participate in it, but looking back at it, I am very proud and I believe that it was worthwhile, provided that the momentum keeps going and does not wither away. I found it rewarding, and, of course, personally challenging in terms of commitment of work and time, but I also found it reaffirmed my faith in humanity a little bit.

How do you think CoFoE compares to Irish deliberative processes – arguably, some of the most advanced globally?

I did get a bit frustrated in terms of the how the process at the EU level unfolded. In Ireland, we do have our Citizens Assemblies that have dealt with very sensitive issues – marriage equality, abortion access – and this led to change in our constitution and law being enacted. The deliverables were very tangible. There are considerable differences with CoFoE. The process is planned and carried out over an extended period of time, recognizing that deliberation can't happen on an ad hoc basis and shortened timeline. The process is also deliberately narrow and driven by discussion of a specific policy area, rather than being open for broader areas of discussion. Finally, each Assembly has a dedicated chairperson with ultimate responsibility for process – during CoFoE, the leadership was split between the three institutions which arguably wasn't as effective. Furthermore, in CoFoE, much to my, and some of the other national citizens' representatives as well, frustration, while each member state was in theory, allowed to follow their own national processes, in accordance with subsidiarity, the ones that were prioritized and afforded more prominence in the plenaries and reports at the EU level were the ones that followed the prescribed model that was laid down in the terms of reference by the CoFoE Secretariat. To me, this does not seem to respect the different ways in which different member states may approach the process at the national level which best serves and suits how respective countries carry out citizen engagement at a national level, e.g., it does not recognize that because Ireland, for example, chooses a different way to engage with its citizens, this does not make the process and output any less valid, valuable, or valued, than how any other countries chose to do it. To me, it is imperative and there is a need to be fair across all member states recognizing the value and validity of

all inputs and methodologies employed by member states at the national level. In terms of the process, there were issues related to the lack of awareness or knowledge on the part of the citizens participating that, in many cases, the European Parliament or the Commission was already undertaking various initiatives related to the discussions, or that they could not do so, based on the existing structure of the EU. Therefore, I believe that there is considerable work to be done in communicating and explaining to EU citizens how things work within the EU, in order for them to be better informed and be able to conduct more effective deliberations.

In terms of the outcomes, the European Commission stated that approximately 80% of its 2023 work programme is, directly or indirectly, based on the recommendations of the CoFoE final report, which is welcome. However, the Council and various member states seem to support that this is not the time to move forward with these issues. There seems to be an inter-institutional disagreement within the EU over not only the issues and ways to address them, but also the type and timing of the process of addressing them, which I do not believe is reflective of the EU citizens' desires. In a way, this reaffirmed the fact that the important issues facing the EU and the member states, are universal, and that a cohesive, solid EU, is really the optimal way of dealing with those challenges. It was interesting that several local and national issues raised by citizens were similar across different member states. In my Working Group of Digital Transformation, for example, every one of us, regardless of which part of the EU we came from, expressed a concern about a lack of equality of access and fairness to digital infrastructure. It was also engaging to see the evolution of citizens' opinions and ways of thinking about these issues as the process progressed. I would see people who were very skeptical and dismissive of increasing the ability of the EU to influence more policy areas, but who, in the end, understood the greater challenges and importance of getting consensus.

What do you think has been the impact on the EU integration and democratic governance processes?

In terms of the EU integration process, I think that all the above enhanced both it and citizen support for it. It is the pebble-ripple effect: all the citizens participating in CoFoE are now speaking about this process to other people in their communities. Creating a consistent, constant mechanism of that citizen feedback loop has, in my opinion, a huge amount of value and merit. In many ways, it takes the message beyond the 'bubble'.

In terms of democratic process, I believe that it will improve it and that it should be utilized to improve it. However, it will require political will to give it impetus, and I am not sure whether there is will to do that. The process of democratic governance

and integration are interrelated, and the political realm is perhaps not ready to progress on integration in order to benefit democratic governance. It was interesting to see how citizens did not want greater integration for the sake of integration but did want to see a more effective and practical-working EU. For example, there was a suggestion that came up in Ireland but also in a couple of other member states as well as the Working Group on Digital Transformation: the European Health Insurance Card. Why are we not able to upload the COVID-19 passes for example in that card digitally? Practical issues, such as this, through which the EU can better support its citizens.

Do you think that, following CoFoE, deliberative processes will be more progressively used at the EU level?

I think the “genie is out of the bottle”: CoFoE seems to have created its own momentum, and I believe that those of us who participated are going to hold the EU institutions to account. It will create a continued drive for deliberative processes at the EU level, and the pressure must be kept in gearing policy-makers towards that direction. I don’t think it will be as ambitious and wide-ranging as some would like it to be, but if we get to a point where there are regular consultations within the institutions and the EU decision-making process, that would be a very successful outcome.

Where do you think the EU will move towards in terms of democratic governance, and where would you like to see it moving towards?

I would definitely like to see the deliberative aspect more enhanced, and I also think that CoFoE has demonstrated the principle and the value of engaging (with) citizens outside of the usual European Parliament election process. It has been particularly useful to involve communities that are less involved or feel they do not have a voice or input into European discussion. So, by building this engagement with policy proposals and getting a citizen-led perspective is tremendously important and valuable. We know all too well in Ireland, for example, with BREXIT, what happens when false information or misinformation, along with years of negative discourse, leads to a binary question on such an important and complicated issue as participation in the EU – we see the outcomes of that now. We understand the importance of constant debate and information sharing – you can never afford to take people for granted and not allow them the opportunity to feel that their voices are heard and they matter. I would hope that the EU has the bravery and foresight to seize on the merits of the CoFoE as an initiative, and nurture it as opposed to stifle it.

Enriching Representative Democratic Institutions with a Deliberative Dimension



George Pagoulatos

Professor of European Politics and Economy, School of Economics, Athens University of Economics & Business; Visiting Professor, College of Europe, Bruges; Director General of ELIAMEP

What has been your role in or involvement with the CoFoE?

I was the national citizens representative for Greece at the Conference on the Future of Europe. In addition, ELIAMEP, of which I am the Director General, organized a number of public events around the Future of Europe theme, published articles and papers, and mobilized students to submit their views on the COFE electronic platform. I personally participated in a number of public events and discussions regarding Future of Europe Conference, wrote articles and gave interviews in the media.

In the Conference I was a member of the Europe in the World working group. I actively participated in its discussions and submitted oral and written proposals. As member of the Plenary, I spoke on the importance of the Conference for European democracy, on Greece's contribution to the pan-European debate, and on the need for the European Union to develop its strategic autonomy. This was also a main focus of my interventions in the Europe in the World working group.

What has CoFoE meant for the process of European integration, both as an initiative and in terms of its output?

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a unique exercise in deliberative and participatory EU-wide democracy. It was sig-

nificant, first of all in terms of the symbolic involvement of 800 randomly selected citizens from all EU countries, in a pan-European deliberation on the Future of our European Union with the representatives of EU institutions, national parliament and government representatives, European civil society and other components. It was also substantially significant, in producing a body of discussions, ideas, proposals and recommendations which are meant to reflect what European societies and citizens think about the course and direction of the European integration project. In that the CoFoE certainly sought to address the recurrent criticism that the citizens voice is not heard in the EU decision-making process.

The Conference produced a final Report covering nine broad thematic areas, bringing forward 49 proposals which included 326 measures. Many of these proposals and ideas, including those which had been uploaded on the CoFoE digital platform, were substantial and innovative.

A disadvantage of the process that affected the content and final output was that participating Citizens by and large lacked prior knowledge of the European Union's institutions and policies. This made it harder for them to contribute meaningful proposals. As a result, many of the proposals and suggested measures fell into one of the following categories: they represented wish lists of generic desiderata, or things the EU is already doing, or things the EU cannot do without major Treaty reform. These of course were still valuable proposals, providing important information on what citizens actually want from the EU. And indeed, the vast majority of the proposals indicated that the citizens demand more from the European Union, want more European integration that will allow the EU to do more on behalf of EU citizens, not less. Still, given the lack of knowledge background, an opportunity was missed for citizens to indicate lower hanging fruits, paths of beneficial policy innovation that are institutionally achievable without requiring major Treaty reform that many would agree does not appear to be politically feasible.

Can CoFoE address the democratic deficiencies of the EU system of governance?

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been valuable in adding a vital deliberative and participatory dimension to the functioning of representative EU institutions. Citizens' participation and deliberation enriches the EU democratic process, but the valuable contribution of CoFoE value is a function of its complementarity to the functioning of the EU's representative democratic institutions rather than a flawed ambition of replacing them with a version of direct democracy.

It would thus be wrong to perceive the direct involvement of citizens under the CoFoE as somehow antagonistic to the func-

tioning of the EU's representative institutions. In fact, the institutional and policy complexity of the European Union, and contemporary governance in general, provide a strong reason why representative democratic institutions are the only path forward, but one that should be further enriched by the direct deliberative dimension introduced by innovative schemes of direct citizens participation such as the CoFoE. Elected representatives and institutions should open more opportunities for the direct involvement of citizens, enriching and supplementing the representative pillar upon which EU democracy sits, rather than purporting to substitute it.

How does the conception and implementation of the CoFoE match existing theoretical approaches and/or applied initiatives of deliberative democracy at the national level?

Deliberative democracy as an approach to governance sees citizens and their elected representatives engage in a process of reasoned discussion and debate in order to reach collective decisions. It is premised on the idea that collective decision-making is more fair and legitimate when based on informed, respectful, and inclusive dialogue among people who are affected by the decision.

Judged by that standard, the CoFoE lacked the depth of interaction and debate between randomly selected citizens and elected representatives, and most importantly lacked the exposure of citizens to the largest possible breadth of information, facts and arguments surrounding the issues in question. These elements should be added for CoFoE or any other similar exercise to acquire greater value and substance.

Theoretical approaches draw on various theoretical contributions, such as by Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, emphasizing the "public use of reason" in democratic decision-making. Applied versions of deliberative democracy include:

Town hall meetings where citizens are invited to participate in discussions and debates on issues of local or national importance.

Citizen juries or deliberative polls, where a representative sample of citizens is selected to participate in a structured discussion and decision-making process on a specific policy issue. They participate in a forum where they can learn about an issue, hear from experts and stakeholders, and engage in discussions with one another. After the forum, the participants are surveyed again to gauge any changes in their opinions as a result of the deliberation process.

Consensus conferences, where ordinary citizens come together to deliberate on a policy issue and to develop recommen-

dations for decision-makers. Consensus conferences often involve presentations from experts, as well as opportunities for attendees to ask questions and engage in discussions.

Participatory budgeting, where citizens are directly involved in deciding how public funds should be allocated in their communities.

Online platforms, such as e-petitions and online forums, where citizens participate from a distance.

All these are examples whose experience can enrich the functioning of deliberative democracy in the European Union.

How do you think the future of the EU in terms of democratic governance will proceed from now on after the CoFoE? How would you like it to?

A path forward in future should involve citizens being informed by experts about the basic functioning of the European Union, its institutions and competences, at least in the policy areas of Working Groups where citizens have chosen to participate. There can be ways such introductory background can be provided without displaying a bias or appearing manipulative.

The CoFoE also demonstrated the limits of direct democracy if citizens are not adequately knowledgeable and informed, and deliberation is insufficient. That is where direct democracy, at national and even more so at pan-European level, will tend to be less constructive compared to representative democratic institutions, able to rely on professional representatives with the obligation of being informed, the resources to acquire an expert understanding of issues, and the time and process to sufficiently deliberate before reaching legislative and policy

decisions. Representative democratic institutions, liberal constitutionalism and the rule of law, and the EU culture of consensus-seeking and compromise, are the necessary ingredients of European democracy, whose participatory dimension can be strengthened and enriched by the additional direct involvement of citizens. Such was the contribution of the CoFoE and it creates an important precedent upon which the European Union must further build and expand.

The CoFoE could become a regular process, comprising randomly selected, upon representative demographic criteria, European Citizen Assemblies, engaging in thematically-specific genuine deliberation on issues pertaining to the Future of Europe. The pan-European online platform should become a permanent interactive feature of the European Union's public communication, its existence broadly advertised and utilized by EU institutions and national governments, as a depository of citizen ideas and recommendations on how to make the European Union better.

Citizens' deliberation should become a recurrent feature of EU policy-making, over selected legislative proposals. And citizens participation should be brought into the process when it comes to major "constitutional" moments of the European Union, including a Treaty revision, in the framework of a European Convention.



Changing the Relationship between Europe and its citizens for the better



Paola Severino

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at LUISS Guido Carli;
Former Minister for Justice of Italy.*

What has been your role in or involvement with the CoFoE?

During CoFoE, I served as a Plenary member, as the representative for Italian Citizens. I also took part in the Working Group on Digital transformation.

What has CoFoE meant for the process of European integration, both as an initiative and in terms of its output?

In my opinion, the Conference represented a major historic moment in the process of European integration. On a symbolic level, for the first time, the European institutions decided to ask the citizens for their views on the priorities for the Union. I believe this approach has been very much appreciated by citizens and the results of CoFoE are of great value, quality and originality. Nevertheless, in order to measure the output of this Conference, it will be necessary to see how citizens' proposals will be followed up, and much of the success of the initiative will ultimately depend on this.

Can CoFoE address the democratic deficiencies of the EU system of governance?

I believe that the course of CoFoE's work has made it clear how much European citizens want to make their voices heard and to

be protagonists of future European choices. I think, and personally hope, that from this new process which has given – as never before – an extraordinary space for action and sharing of ideas to European citizens, there can be no turning back. To provide structured moments of confrontation with citizens in order to listen to their proposals can have a significant impact on European governance and enhance public trust.

How does the conception and implementation of the CoFoE match existing theoretical approaches and/or applied initiatives of deliberative democracy at the national level?

To the best of my knowledge, it does not seem to me that there are any events or initiatives at a national level with the same structure and impact as the CoFoE.

How do you think the future of the EU in terms of democratic governance will proceed from now on after the CoFoE? How would you like it to?

I believe that this Conference may have changed the relationship between Europe and its citizens for the better, by recognizing the need for a more constant dialogue. There was talk during the conference of the idea that a ‘citizens’ assembly’, which could share views on crucial issues for the future of Europe, could be made permanent. I feel that this is something to be taken into consideration and on which there could be convergence.



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