

European Parliament Groups' Perspectives on the Future of Europe: In the European House of Conflicting Ideas¹

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Abstract

The European Parliament offers a unique opportunity to examine how the European Union's future is debated – by the supranational representatives of its citizens. This chapter therefore analyses a selection of plenary debates related to the future of the European integration, focusing on the reform proposals put forward by European political groups concerning key democratic issues, such as differentiated integration and dominance within the Union. This reveals nuanced differences between and within the groups that go beyond the simplistic pro- versus anti-European integration divide.

Introduction

Since 2015, the discussions about the future of European integration have gained increasing prominence, with the European Parliament (EP)

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emerging as a unique forum to examine how the future of the European Union (EU) is debated within a supranational institution. Established in 1952 and directly elected since 1979, the EP represents the citizens of the Union and has progressively expanded its influence in legislative, budgetary, and supervisory domains, significantly enhancing its role within the EU's political framework (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2016; Hix and Høyland 2013; Héritier et al. 2019). The EP plenary thus offers Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) democratic avenues to contribute their constituents' perspectives, as well as their political groups' visions, to debates on the EU's future. Given the EP's growing power, increasing significance is attached to the content of MEPs' speeches.

Against this backdrop, this chapter zooms in on the EP and analyses a selection of its plenary debates to explore how MEPs articulate their visions of the future of European integration. Our findings reveal that each parliamentary group advocated for distinct visions of the EU's future, with varying degrees of political, social and economic integration. However, a pronounced divide emerged between groups regarding proposed reforms. Eurosceptic groups, in particular, tended to refrain from offering concrete proposals, focusing instead on a harsh critique of the EU. Moreover, national affiliations play a significant role in shaping MEPs' views, occasionally causing intra-group divergences on the future of Europe (FoE).

Political parties and groups

Political parties at the European level typically consist of like-minded national parties from member states. Known as Europarties, their role and resources have been increasing over time (Héritier, et al. 2019). With the 2014 EP election, for example, Europarties started to nominate their own candidate for the all-important position of Commission president. Nevertheless, the elections to the EP are still conducted within national constituencies, where voters choose between – and sometimes within – the lists of candidates put forward by national parties. As a result, there is a long-lasting debate about whether Europarties are best seen as parties themselves or as umbrella organisations of national parties (Sigalas and Pollak 2012).

Once elected to the EP, MEPs form political groups in the Parliament, provided that there are at least 25 MEPs from 25% of the member states

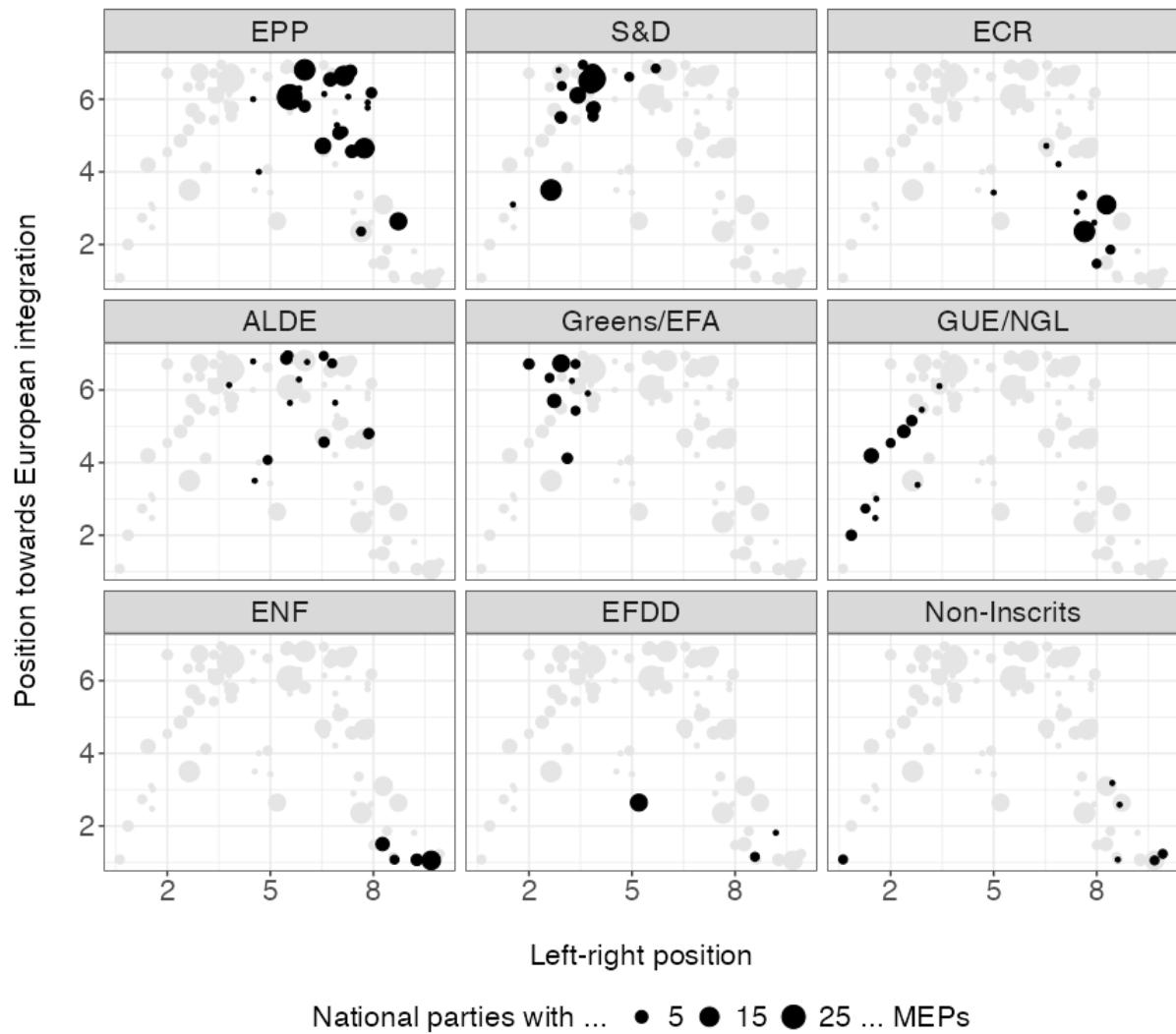
willing to share an affiliation. Europarties facilitate forming political groups, and indeed most MEPs become affiliated with the political group of the Europarty of their national party. However, Europarties and the political groups of the EP are officially separate organisations. As a result, members from multiple Europarties can form a single group in the EP. In fact, MEPs can join a different group than the one affiliated with the Europarty of their national party or choose to remain independent.

Both national parties and European political groups affect the legislative behaviour in the EP (Hix 2002, Slapin and Proksch 2010). Sorace (2018) shows that MEPs are more likely to speak in the plenary debates if they are seeking re-election (through their national party) or have a seat on the frontbench (of their European political group).⁴ When there is a divergence between the positions of these two principals, MEPs voting in line with the wishes of their national party speak more often, compared to the MEPs voting with their European political group (Slapin and Proksch 2010). In terms of policy positions, the debates are shaped by (dis)agreements based rather on national or pro-/anti-integration dimensions than the classic left-right dimension (Proksch and Slapin 2010).

Given the relationship between national parties, Europarties, and European political groups, one way to understand the policy positions of the groups in the EP is to look at the position of national parties from which their MEPs come. Figure 1 therefore plots the left-right positions of national parties and their positions towards European integration for the European political groups in the EP at the end of the eighth term in April 2019. It shows that there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between these positions: parties at or around the centre of the left-right political spectrum tend to support European integration, while others – positioned towards the ends of the classic spectrum – tend to oppose it. Overall, these results fit in well with the qualitative analyses of where Europarties and European political groups stand politically (Raunio 2017; Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2016).

⁴ Technically, it is the political groups that allocate speaking time to their members. Additionally, MEPs can have spontaneous opportunities to speak, subject to the president's approval through the catch-the-eye procedure, for short interventions towards the end of plenary debates. See Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton (2016, 197-198) for further details.

Figure 1. Left-right positions of national parties and their positions towards European integration, by European political groups



Note: Higher scores indicate, respectively, right-wing and pro-integration positions. Party positions are from the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert FLASH Survey (Polk, et al. 2017), while the party compositions reflect the situation as of April 2019.

At the end of the eighth term, the largest groups in Parliament were the centre-right European People's Party Group (EPP), composed of Christian democratic parties, and the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), comprising socialist parties (see composition of the Parliament in Appendix 2). Indeed, MEPs from these party families have been forming the two main groups throughout the history of the Parliament (Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton 2016).

These groups frequently work together to push through a pro-integration agenda, and this pro-integration coalition sometimes includes the liberal-centrists in the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for

Europe (ALDE) for a “super grand coalition” (Hix and Høyland 2013). The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) was another group with MEPs from parties with pro-integration positions in this term. In contrast, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) had anti-integration positions. This group structure remained largely the same after the 2019 EP election.⁵

Selected of plenary debates

Our analysis draws on 18 plenary debates held in the European Parliament between 2015 and 2020. As shown in Appendix 1, six of these focus on the broader discussion of Europe’s future, six specifically addresses migration policy, and the remaining six are dedicated to the Eurozone.

The broader debates analysed include four speeches by heads of state from France, Poland, Germany, and Italy, selected for their geographic diversity and differing views on European integration. These speeches were part of a series of extraordinary debates following the Brexit referendum, as the EU engaged in a reflection process on its future. This series of debates was dedicated to member states’ Heads of States and Governments and MEPs to discuss the European Commission’s White Paper on the Future of Europe, published in 2017. In addition to these, our selection includes a debate on the Conference on the Future of Europe and a debate on the EU budget.

The debates on migration were among those tackled the 2015 migration crisis and its aftermath – including reforming the EU asylum and migration policy – and the situation at the EU’s external border, i.e. the Greek-Turkish and Polish-Belarusian borders. The Eurozone debates covered key issues such as completing the Economic and Monetary Union, institutional reforms, budgetary capacity, and economic and social policies.

MEPs’ participation in debating the future of Europe

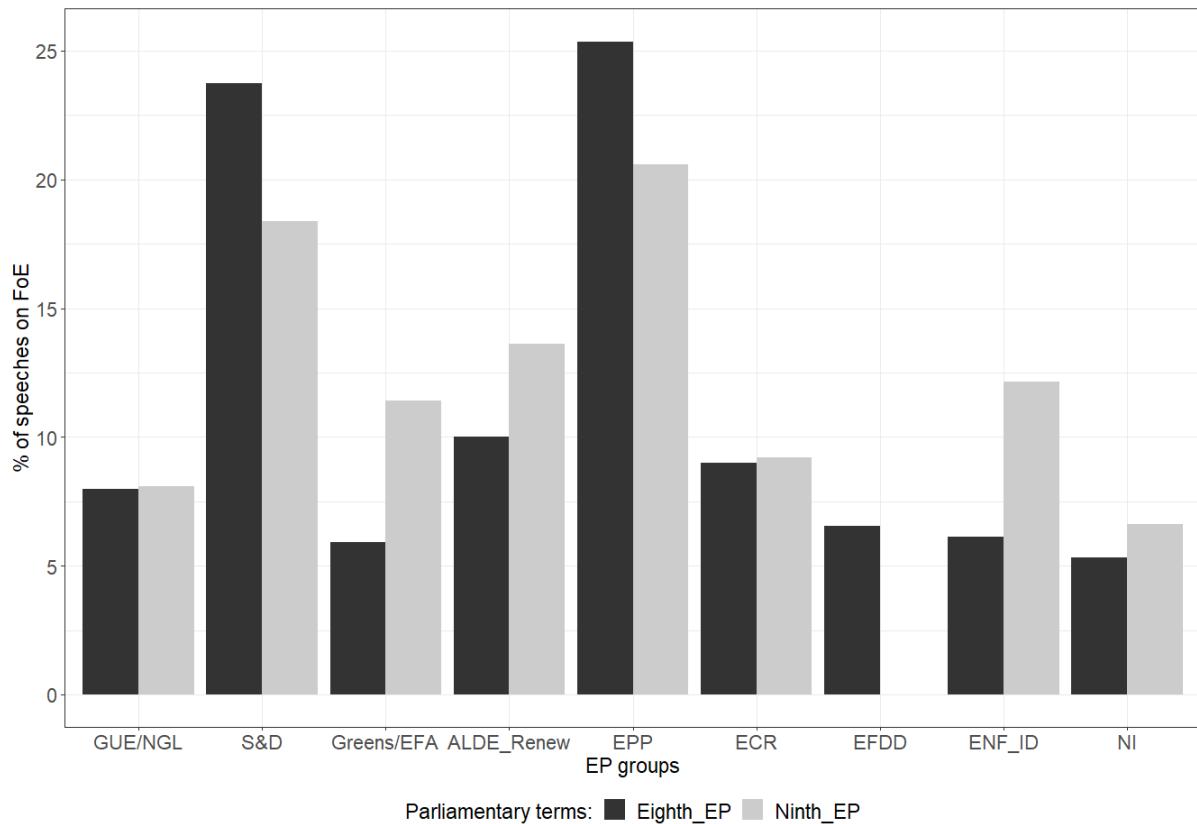
This first section looks at MEPs taking a stand during plenary sessions on the future of Europe. It investigates participation in debates in relation to

⁵ EFDD ceased to exist, ALDE became Renew Europe (Renew), and ENF was replaced by Identity and Democracy (ID) at the beginning of the ninth term of the Parliament.

European parliamentary groups and national party positions vis-à-vis European integration.

Figure 2 below shows MEPs' participation in the FoE debates by parliamentary groups. The EPP and S&D groups were the main drivers of the debates. The groups' strong presence in the EP partly justified their important participation in debating the future of European integration, alongside the fact that both groups attempted to push forward their own agenda and proposals on the EU. Indeed, as later explained, both groups expressed diverse views on European integration and presented specific recommendations to reify it.

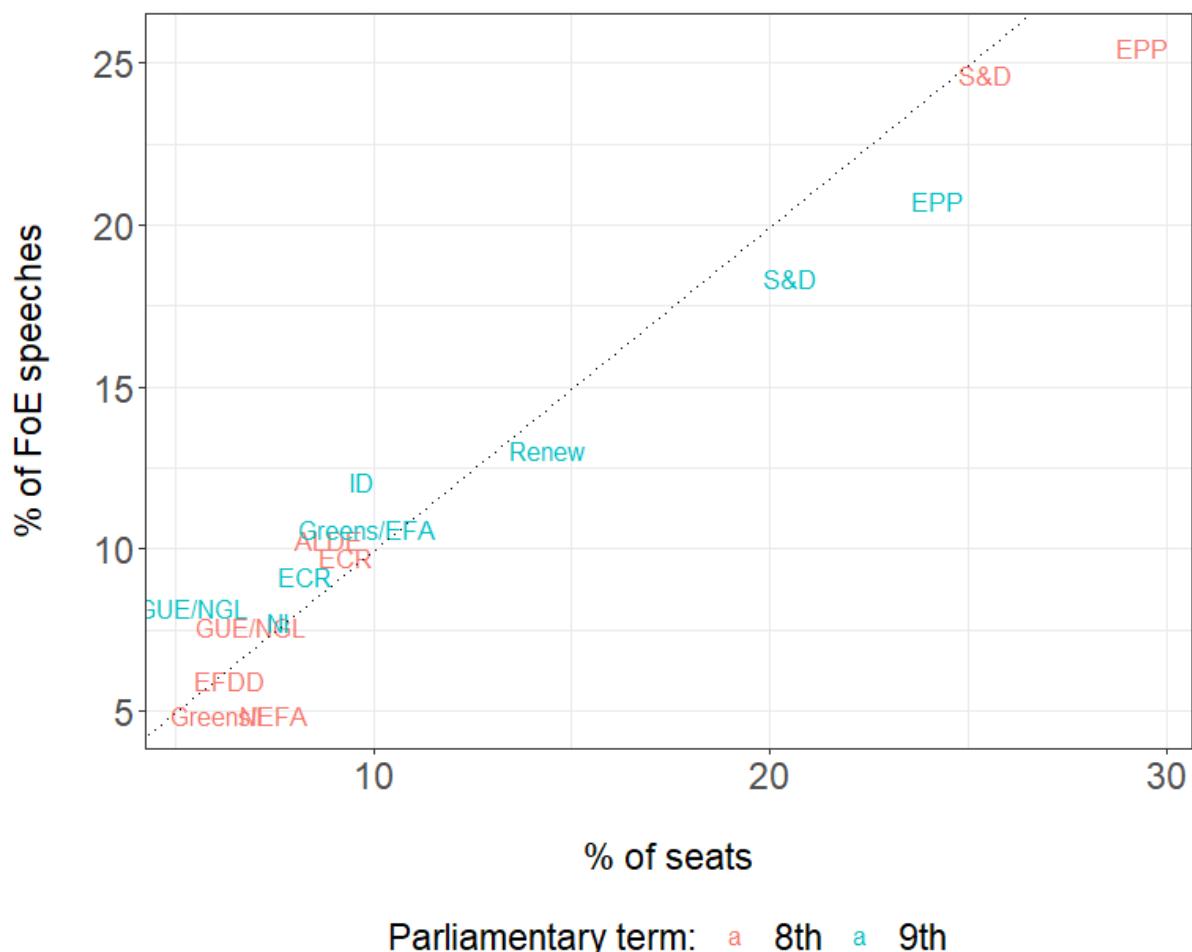
Figure 2. MEPs' participation in the analysed debates by EP group affiliation (N=761 – number FoE speeches⁶)



⁶ An FoE speech is defined as a speech from MEPs containing at least one of the core codes (i.e. related to reforms, democracy, territorial differentiation or dominance) in selected parliamentary sessions related to thematic debates on the future of Europe, the Eurozone and immigration. Speeches from other political actors intervening in debates have not been taken into account in the analysis, as they usually represent other EU institutions, while this chapter focuses on the EP. In the qualitative analysis the ALDE and Renew groups as well as the ENF and ID groups have been merged, as sharing similar political positions.

The far-right ID group was noticeably active in debating the future of Europe: in the ninth EP, the ID group significantly increased its participation (twice as much as the ENF in the eighth EP during the analysed debates). Furthermore, when considering the size of the groups (in terms of seats in the EP), Eurosceptic parties were particularly active during debates, notably given their limited number of seats in comparison to the EPP and S&D groups, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. MEPs' participation in the analysed parliamentary debates by EP group affiliation and taking into account EP groups' size (N=761 – number of FoE speeches)



When looking at participation by topics (i.e., the general future of Europe debate, immigration policy, or the Eurozone), MEPs particularly discussed issues related to migration. The ID group's participation during the ninth term was particularly high on the topic of migration, reflecting the prioritisation of the far right's opposition to immigration in their political agenda, even after the 2015 migration crisis (Gessler and Hunger 2022).

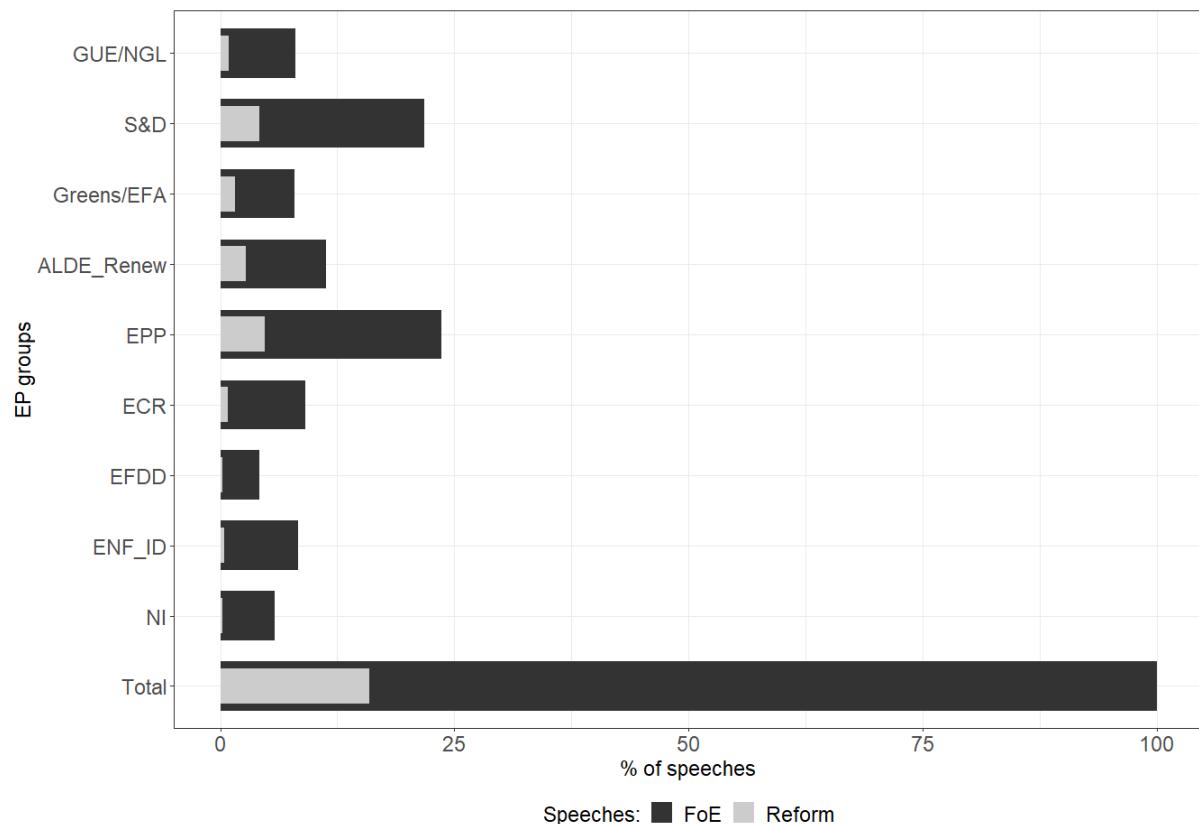
Overall, the main drivers of the debates on Europe's future were mostly pro-European integration MEPs. Nonetheless, groups on the fringes of the political spectrum (GUE/NGL, ENF, EFDD, ECR and ID) were active, especially when considering the size of these groups in the EP. The analysis of the content of the speeches will exhibit the various visions of the EU's future that those actors expressed.

EU institutional reform proposals

One of the dimensions explored in this volume regarding the future of Europe pertains to the EU's institutional setup. Indeed, as argued in the introduction (Góra et al. 2026 in this volume), reforms in the responsibilities and power repartition between institutions at the EU and/or national level are useful indicators to explore a speaker's vision of European integration.

As shown in Figure 4, mentions of institutional reforms of the EU occurred in 15% of all speeches related to FoE. Requests for EU institutional reforms were especially made by mainstream EP groups. Groups on the fringes of the political spectrum – i.e. the left GUE/NGL or the far-right groupings ECR, EFDD, ENF and ID – rather abstained from requesting changes on EU institutional matters, as also shown in Styczyńska and Thevenin's chapter (2026 in this volume).

Figure 4. Request for EU institutional reforms by EP groups in analysed debates (N=761 – number of FoE speeches; n=121 – number of speeches containing at least one institutional reform proposal)



Several measures were proposed by MEPs with the aim to make the EU more democratic:

The future needs a strengthening of European democracy, no decision without the European Parliament, the elimination of unanimity in the decision-making process, a European right to vote with European lists, the right of initiative, budget sovereignty, self-financing, European referendums. The future needs a European government that will then be the spokesperson for the continent in the world and have a common foreign, security and defense policy in place. Our future needs European answers to the global challenges, our future needs an internal market without barriers, our future needs a budget that corresponds to the size of the tasks, the number of the population of Europe and which invests in the future. (Othmar Karas, EPP, AT, EP_2020-01-14_FoE)

Zooming in on the different institutional reforms proposed by MEPs during debates, the strengthening of the EP has been the most frequently addressed proposal, as displayed in Figure 5. The EPP and S&D groups demanded the development of the EP's powers, considering it as the

guardian of democracy: “[T]he community method must be made strong. We will only be able to be successful in the future if the European House of Democracy has a say” (Udo Bullmann, S&D, DE, EP_2018-11-13_FoE).⁷ Expressing MEPs’ own interest in having a greater say on European affairs, the claims to reform and strengthen the EP notably entailed implementing a right of legislative initiative for the EP, even if it required Treaty changes:

Parliament is already a strong chamber, but it lacks one right, namely the right of initiative, which every parliament knows. We know that changing the Lisbon Treaty is a big task. (Manfred Weber, EPP, DE, EP_2018-11-13_FoE)

Alongside strengthening the role of the EP, MEPs also requested a stronger role for national parliaments (NPs) within the EU’s functioning:

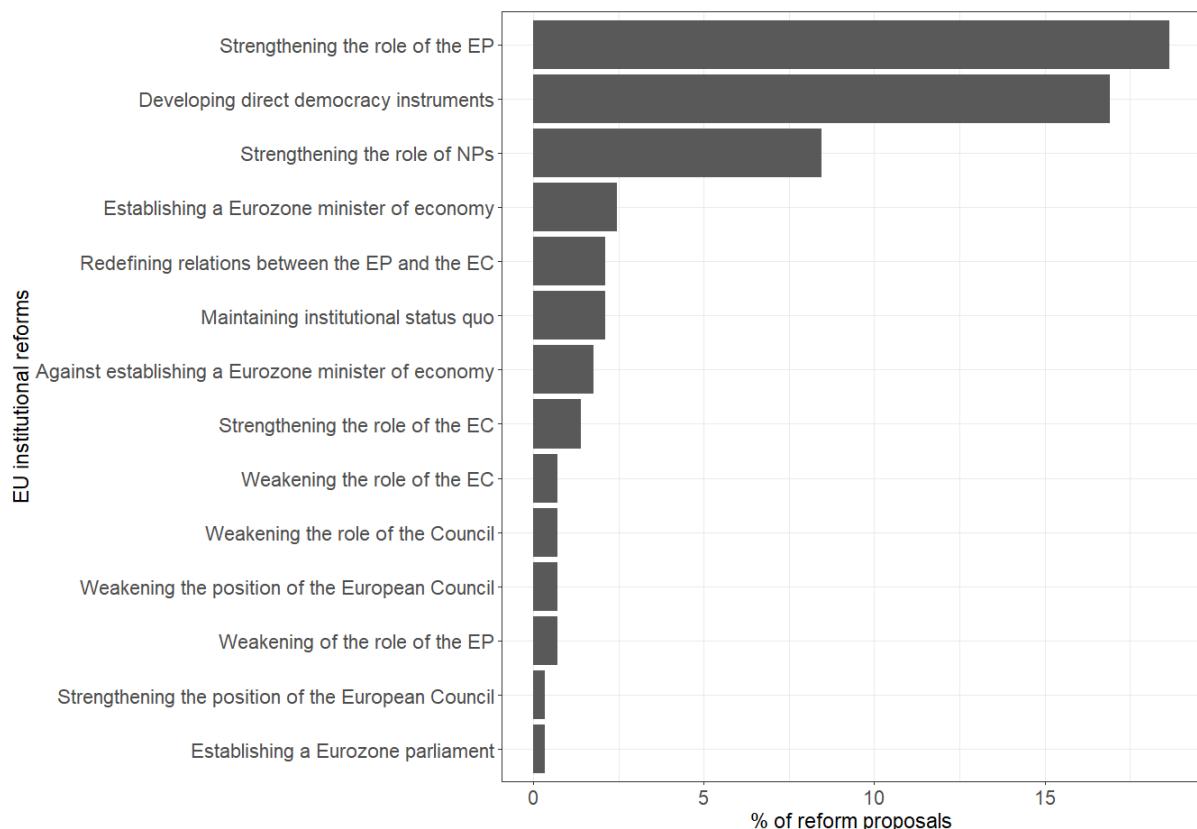
It is not the symbolic politics of the summits that help us, but the strengthening of parliamentary structures, because they mean more transparency and participation. This has to be done at Council level and through the involvement of national parliaments. (Josef Weidenholzer, S&D, AT, EP_2017-02-14_Eurozone)

This strengthening of the EP and of NPs was especially seen as needed when it comes to budgetary overview and Eurozone issues. In budgetary and economic matters, requests for a stronger role of NPs were made to ensure greater stability in member states; in other contexts, these requests aimed at reconnecting the EU and its citizens. Further on this point, several MEPs – especially from the EPP group – advocated for having an EU finance minister, alongside a “common presence in the International Monetary Fund and in the World Bank” (Othmar Karas, EPP, AT, EP_2015-12-15_Eurozone). One MEP further requested setting up “a euro government, a euro parliament and a budget for the euro zone” (Jakob von Weizsäcker, S&D, DE, EP_2015-12-15_Eurozone). However, far-right groups were fiercely opposed to these requested changes in the institutional setting of the Eurozone: “[T]he European Parliament thinks that all these problems will be solved if the Eurozone gets its own administration with additional money again. That, Mr President, shows that this Parliament has apparently not learned anything” (Auke Zijlstra,

⁷ Quotes from the analysed debates were translated by the authors of the chapter and are presented with the MEPs’ name, EP group and national affiliation, as well as the code of the debate.

ENF, NL, EP_2017-02-14_Eurozone). Likewise, some EPP members disapproved of changes within the administration of the Eurozone, leading to some fragmentation in the group's position on Eurozone governance.

Figure 5. EU institutional reforms proposed in analysed FoE speeches (N=284 – number of institutional reform proposals (one speech may contain more than one reform)



Other institutional changes included the implementation of the Spitzenkandidat system to increase the democratic legitimacy of the EU, but also "the elimination of the veto power of the states in the Council, with the passage to the qualified majority" (Javier Moreno Sánchez, S&D, ES, EP_2020-01-15_FoE). These reforms were mostly supported by S&D and ALDE/Renew, and several EPP MEPs. One has to note that while those reforms were mentioned several times by MEPs, they were not elaborated upon during speeches.

With comparable concern for EU democracy, the implementation of direct democracy instruments within the EU institutional system has been seen as a priority for the S&D and Renew groups. Especially discussed in the context of the future implementation of the Conference on the Future of

Europe (CoFoE), MEPs highlighted the importance of strengthening the links between EU institutions and EU citizens:

The first change must be in the way of involving citizens in these European processes, because Europe was not created for Brussels or for an elite or for a bubble, but to serve all citizens. The conference can become a great opportunity to renew Europe if we have the courage to get out of our procedural way of thinking and really give a voice to citizens in their diversity. (Dacian Ciolos, Renew, RO, EP_2020-01-15_FoE)

MEPs stressed the need for EU citizens' vision(s) of the future of Europe to be included when designing new reforms or policy instruments:

[T]his conference to rebuild the European Union is more than necessary, but citizens must be directly involved in this work, the debate must leave the institutions to irrigate all our societies. How to strengthen our European democracy, how to build a common army, how to establish a common tax system? These questions and so many others must be debated and decided involving as many citizens as possible. It is not just a matter of consulting, but of co-constructing. (Raphaël Glucksmann, S&D, FR, EP_2020-01-15_FoE)

The involvement of citizens was considered as crucial for the CoFoE to be successful and, more importantly, for the future of European integration. Several MEPs noted the extraordinary moment that CoFoE represented for EU democracy and pushed for more actions in bringing citizens closer to the EU, leading to an EU constitution:

Let us therefore have the courage and trust in our citizens to commission a directly elected citizens' convention to draft a new EU constitution and let Europeans themselves decide in a Europe-wide referendum on the EU they want to have. (Patrick Breyer, Greens/EFA, DE, EP_2020-01-15_FoE)

Other MEPs expressed some concerns regarding the way EU institutions will take citizens' recommendations into account: "This process cannot be reduced to a tokenistic rubber-stamping exercise" (Scott Ainslie, Greens/EFA, UK, EP_2020-01-15_FoE).

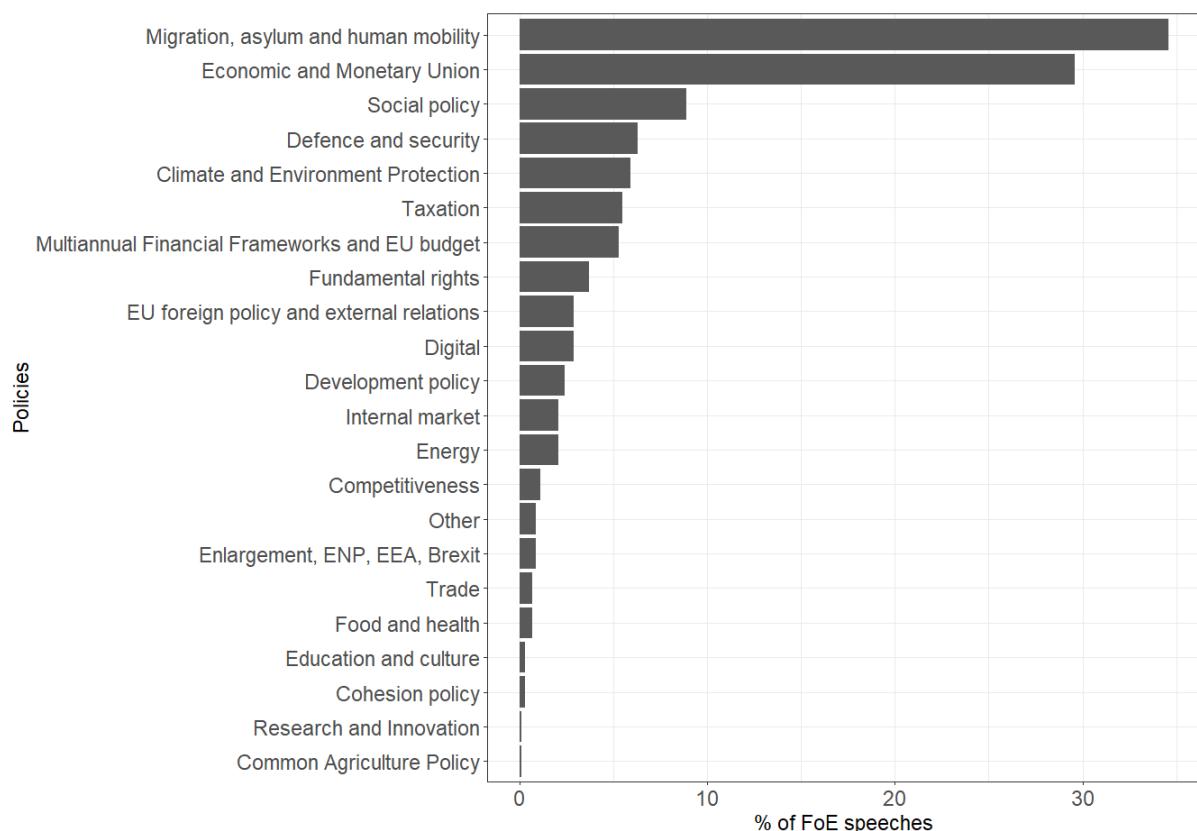
It is also important to note that some MEPs advocated for keeping the current status quo rather than proposing institutional reforms. This was the case of both groups on the two-end sides of the spectrum, who considered changes as the imposition of a particular vision of the EU,

which they opposed. Several EPP members shared this vision and requested that the EU remain unchanged when it comes to its functioning. Similarly, several EPP MEPs disapproved of the implementation of transnational lists for EU elections as well as treaty modifications. The EPP faction – already prone to disagreement on some issues, notably fundamental values (Herman, Hoerner, and Lacey 2021) – was hence not in full agreement regarding EU institutional reforms.

Diverse policy priorities

Among the most discussed policy areas in the EP were migration and asylum, Economic and Monetary Union (EMU),⁸ social policy, defence and security policy, and climate and environment – see Figure 6 below. This section focuses on some specific points addressed when discussing these policies as to better understand MEPs' priorities and vision of FoE.

Figure 6. Discussed policy areas by MEPs in analysed debates (N=761 – number of FoE speeches; one FoE speech may contain more than one policy area mentioned)



⁸ Both migration and EMU were subject to specific parliamentary debates.

Debates on migration created a lot of conflict within the EP, between those in favour of a more human-oriented migration policy and those focused on security. Debates on migration did not result in a demand for broad EU reforms, but rather specific policy proposals, such as reforming the Dublin regulation or setting up a quota system for refugees. The proposal of setting mandatory quotas, as done by the European Commission (EC) in 2015 to face the so-called migration crisis, went beyond a pro- and anti-immigration or pro- and anti-European integration division, and brought a geographical divide in parliament opposing countries on the borders to member states less exposed to migration. Indeed, as Italy and Greece were particularly struggling over the influx of incoming people in 2015, Greek and Italian far-right MEPs supported establishing a mandatory quota system at EU level to help their countries:

[A] mechanism [Directive 2001/55/EC] that obliges, and I stress obliges, member states to cooperate with each other in transferring refugees from one state to another, but this mechanism has existed since 2001 and has never been activated. You, gentlemen, have never activated it. You fill your mouths with solidarity, you talk about sharing, but you persist in seeing immigration as a problem to be left to Italy, Spain and Greece. Europe is washing its hands of it. (Tiziana Beghin, EFDD, IT, EP_2015-04-29_Migration)

Similar discussion on EU solidarity occurred about Poland in 2021 in the context of the crisis occurring at the Polish-Belarusian border: "Today, we must send out a clear message of solidarity with Poland. Poland is not the problem, but is today a frontline country. What we are seeing is not a refugee crisis, but an attack on the European Union, using women and children as human shields" (Riho Terras, EPP, EE, EP_2021-11-10_Migration).

The situation at the Polish border involved discussion about building a wall, which was favoured by ID, ECR and EPP MEPs:

The external borders of the EU must be hermetically sealed. Why does the European Commission refuse to facilitate financially the construction of a physical barrier on the EU's external border, as requested by many countries and citizens? (Robert Roos, ECR, NL, EP_2021-11-10_Migration)

Interestingly, groups that were in general reluctant to develop European integration

and usually preferred a return of competences to the national level (i.e., ID, ECR, or even EPP) advocated for a European solution to policing the border. Hence, the securitisation of migration may lead to Eurosceptic actors to demand European measures under certain conditions.

The construction of the wall was fiercely disputed by other groups, appealing to EU values and human rights protection. The debate on migration policy thus surpassed a single policy discussion and questioned the position and purpose of the EU in the international arena. Two confronting visions could be identified:

A strong EU able to defend its borders – “We have to protect the European borders. And yes, we should always protect European values too. But this is not the time to give in and be weak”. (Tomas Tobé, EPP, SE, EP_2021-11-10_Migration)

Opposed to a humanitarian power Europe – “What has characterised Europe – our contribution to the world – has been precisely humanitarian. Our contribution to solidarity”. (Maite Pagazaurtundúa, Renew, ES, EP_2021-11-10_Migration)

Regarding internal EU matters, the EMU has been central to many discussions on FoE with concrete policy proposals. MEPs, especially from the S&D, for instance approved of setting up a budget for the Eurozone, alongside a common fiscal policy or a banking union. The aim of this deepening of the EMU is to allow the EU “to grow, to distribute better, to guarantee freedoms, to bring convergence and to be in solidarity with the rest of the world” (Enrique Guerrero Salom, S&D, ES, EP_2017-02-14_Eurozone). These proposals were not supported by far-right groups in the EP:

The single currency, the euro, was the criminal project that definitively destroyed the peoples of Europe and, instead of talking about dismantling the Economic and Monetary Union, today we are even proposing a budget for the Eurozone, which will sanction the destructive institutionalisation of the troika. With Brexit, the EU and the euro have become walking dead. (Marco Zanni, ENF, IT, EP_2017-02-14_Eurozone)

Criticism of deepening the EMU came mostly from far-right MEPs due to the perceived dominance of EU institutions in budgetary and economic matters. Discussions on the EMU clearly illustrated internal conflicts in

the EP with competing discourses in favour of or against deepening EU competences in the economic field.

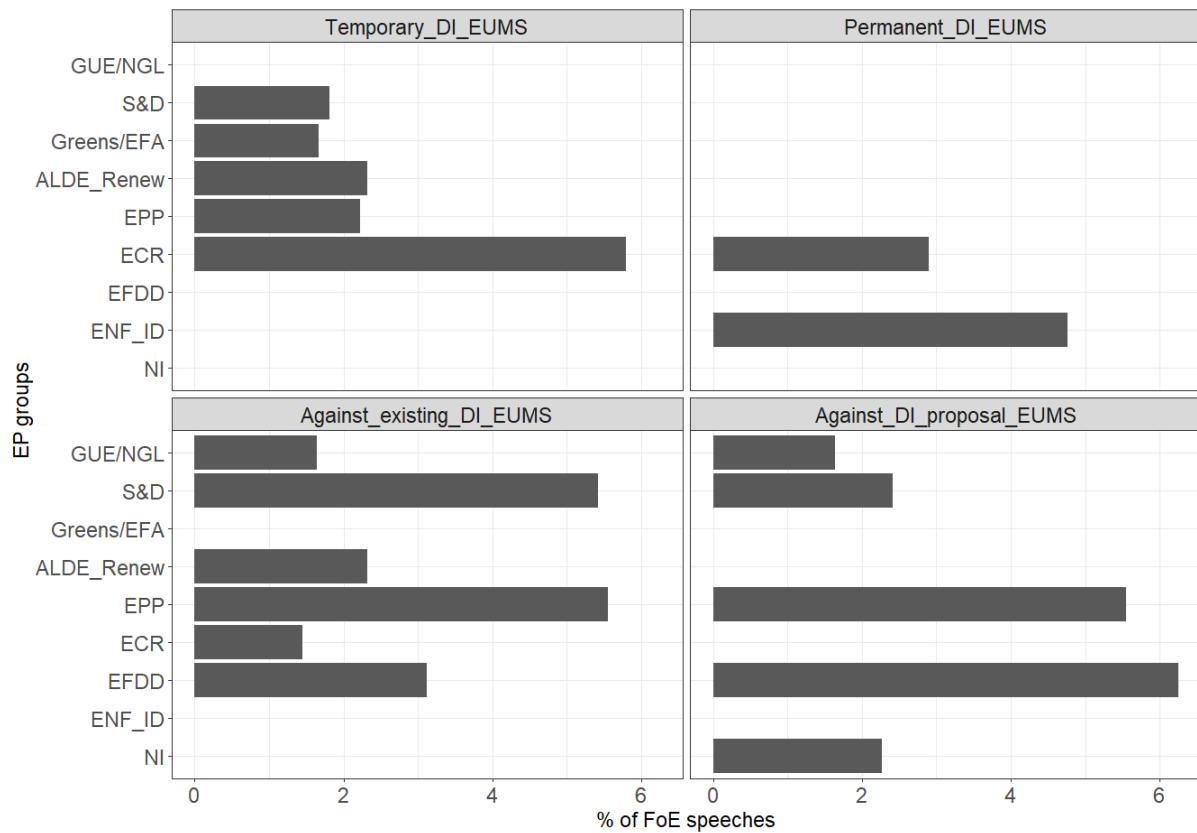
The GUE/NGL, S&D and Renew groups were especially keen on bringing social policy onto the parliamentary floor, asking to develop the “European Pillar of Social Rights” by notably setting up an “EU minimum wage” (Julie Ward, S&D, UK, EP_2019-10-10_Eurozone). With the protection and EU-wide harmonisation of EU citizens’ social rights, these groups, along with the Greens/EFA alliance, requested greater EU competences and capacities in climate and environmental protection. Comparatively, the other EP groups rather abstained from expressing concrete proposals in these policy areas.

Overall, there was no agreement among EP groups on a common voice for developing a single policy area. These diverging policy positions manifested the diverse visions and understandings of what the EU is and should become, notably influenced by their position vis-a-vis differentiated integration (DI) and dominance in the EU.

Perceptions of differentiated integration and dominance in the EU

DI and dominance are treated in this volume as key elements and indicators of the FoE debate (Góra et al. 2026 in this volume). DI remained relatively on the margins of the debate on the future of Europe in the EP – it was mentioned in 12.6% of FoE speeches. DI was especially brought up in debates related to the Eurozone and migration, with respect to the (non-)adoption of the common currency and the implementation of solidarity. In both cases, DI was rather supported by far-right groups as a possibility to decide for themselves on a given policy, supporting a more sovereignist model of European integration.

Figure 7. EP groups' views on DI (N=761 – number of FoE speeches; one speech may contain more than one mention)



Regarding Eurozone matters, DI has been supported regarding the adoption of a common currency – “I do not share their enthusiasm and believe that the time has not come close to accepting a common currency” (Ruža Tomašić, ECR, HR, EP_2019-10-10_Eurozone) – but also the composition of the Eurozone in itself. The participation of Greece was indeed sometimes questioned by MEPs. Overall, ECR, ENF and ID MEPs favoured permanent differentiation of the Eurozone, fearing that: “The euro will split the EU” (Bernd Kölmel, ECR, DE, EP_2017-02-14_Eurozone). Yet other parliamentary groups, especially the EPP and S&D, disapproved of DI in this particular context: “we want to strengthen the monetary union, but also expand it to all member states, because our goal is not to divide into the eurozone and others” (Ivana Maletić, EPP, HR, EP_2015-12-15_Eurozone). The possible outcome of DI – i.e., as mentioned in the quote above, resulting in division between member states – raised concerns among MEPs, who highlighted the need for a common economic and monetary system for the EU to be strong in the international arena.

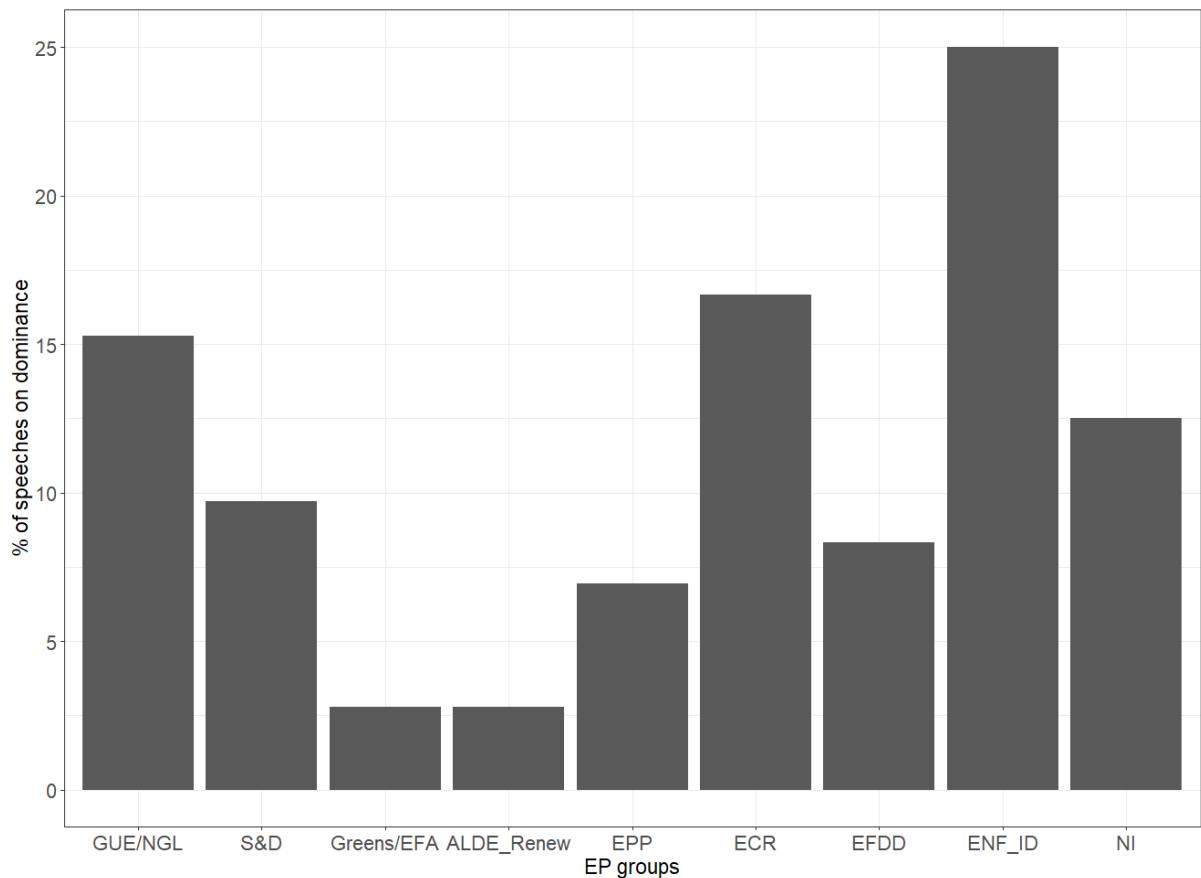
DI in the field of migration was especially mentioned in the context of the relocation schemes and the realisation of solidarity between EU member states. Favoured by far-right groups, especially from Central and Eastern European countries, DI in migration policy mostly entailed not accepting a mandatory quota system, but implementing EU solidarity in different forms, up to member states' choice.

MEPs therefore suggested different proposals to lessen the pressure from the country of entry to the EU, without having to take in incoming people. However, MEPs from countries greatly impacted by the migration crisis or from S&D and ALDE groups did not support this differentiated solidarity: "Since we are talking about people, we must all be equally responsible towards them: responsibility cannot be shared 'à la carte'" (Eliza Vozemberg, EPP, EL, EP_2015-09-16_Migration).

Visions of DI remained quite conflicted in terms of its extent across the EU, as well as the policy it is implemented in. For parties on the fringes, DI was mostly perceived positively to avoid an all-dominating EU.

References to dominance were indeed present in 9.5% of FoE speeches in the EP. As shown in Figure 8 below, it is of little surprise that dominance was especially mentioned and criticised by far-right factions in parliament, i.e. ENF, ID, EFDD, ECR and GUE/NGL. While some nuances can be discerned among right-wing Eurosceptic groups on their perception of dominance (Styczyńska and Thevenin 2023), a common opposition to the functioning of the EU can be observed.

Figure 8. Repartition by EP groups of references to dominance (N=72 – number of speeches on dominance)



Perceived dominance mostly pertained to a perceived illicit hierarchy in the EU that resulted in some member states, EP groups or national political parties feeling excluded from the decision-making process. Due to the EU's "Diktat(s)" (used by several MEPs from GUE/NGL, ECR and ID), "imposition(s)" (used by MEPs from GUE/NGL and ENF) or "bullying tactics" (Francis Zammit Dimech, MT, EPP, EP_2019-01-15_Migration), voices were left unheard, triggering a profound opposition against the EU:

Enough of Europe enslaved by banks and multinationals. Enough with the Europe of spread and austerity. Enough with the Europe of Juncker, Merkel, Macron, who want to rule our house and humiliate the Italian people. In Italy, Italian citizens are in charge, not Merkel or Macron. (Mara Bizzotto, ENF, IT, EP_2019-02-12_FoE)

As shown in the above example, MEPs' speeches addressing dominance in the EU often relied on populist components, notably by stressing the opposition between the European elite and people in Europe – key

opposition in populist rhetoric (e.g. Mudde 2004). Depending on groups, national affiliations, but also on policies, the entity on top of the pictured illicit hierarchy varied from being another EU member state or EU institutions. “German domination” (Diana James, EFDD, UK, EP_2015-09-16_Migration) was often criticised, notably when it came to Eurozone matters, for imposing its own rule:

The euro has become a German-inspired Roman arena, where the strong impose their will and interests on the weak. It has plunged countries into recession, unemployment and the eurozone in general into stagnation. It has condemned the younger generation to long-term unemployment. (Nikolaos Chountis, GUE/NGL, EL, EP_2015-12-15_Eurozone)

The imposition of decisions of one - or more - EU member states against the will of others has been framed by far-right MEPs as a key democratic problem in the EU against European citizens.

Comparably, the EU was also severely criticised, notably over the lack of transparency in the decision-making process: “Parliament dictates idiotic and unworkable proposals, like air bridges between Africa and Europe, and then marvels at the refusal of the member states” (Helga Stevens, ECR, BE, EP_2019-01-15_Migration). This lack of transparency did not simply concern the EP, but also other EU institutions, notably the EC:

Here we have a commissioner, a commissioner who is a representative of the executive body, and the commissioner is telling the Polish parliament and the Polish courts what to do with this and that law, or how this law should be changed. Is that an example of the separation of powers? It is a blatant violation of the separation of powers. (Ryszard Antoni Legutko, ECR, PL, EP_2018-07-04_FoE)

The perceived dominance by MEPs was often linked with a perceived problem in the EU’s democratic functioning, either due to its lack of democratic legitimacy or due to an issue in the relations between EU institutions and the member states.

Perceived dominance by MEPs was especially evident in debates on migration – albeit for opposing reasons. On the one hand, and as mentioned above with the perceived dominance of Germany in the EU, accepting migrants and refugees from foreign cultures was perceived as a cultural imposition:

They [new reforms] will suffer the same failure as the Juncker plan of 2015, which aimed to relocate 160,000 migrants and which several European states rightly resisted in order to preserve their national identity. The peoples of Europe are mortal, they know it and do not want to die. The Brussels Commission is mortal too, but it seems to ignore it. If it does not want to listen to the peoples of Europe, it will disappear. (Gilles Lebreton, ENF, FR, EP_2019-01-15_Migration)

On the other hand, the dominance of a security logic in the treatment of migration policy was also perceived by some MEPs on the left of the political spectrum as an unfair hegemonic position:

Once again it is shown that the dominant circles in the Union do not care about human rights and peace. On the contrary, they are seriously responsible for the current humanitarian crisis: they support and participate in the interventions and wars that are bloodying peoples and creating the mass waves of refugees. (Neoklis Sylikiotis, GUE/NGL, CY, EP_2015-09-16_Migration)

This opposed perceived dominance resulted in an extremely fragmented parliament, where both sides of the political spectrum accused each other of dominating the debate and political decisions. At the core of the issue lay the question of the prioritisation of EU values or of national interests – which are mostly seen as contradictory. In this perspective, the EU as a system was fundamentally considered to be based either on common values or on diverse sovereign states sharing some common but delimited elements, which resulted in very different visions of the EU's future.

Conclusions

This chapter analysed the EP groups' position on the future of Europe, i.e. on reforming the EU, as well as the underlying constitutional narratives pursued by the groups. Through analysis of parliamentary speeches, we demonstrated that there is neither a single narrative on the EU in the EP nor a strict opposition between pro- and anti-EU integration, but a variety of visions of the EU – with more or less variation due to national and political differences within parliamentary groups. The analysis of debates in the EP demonstrated that all parliamentary groups pushed forward different visions of the future of European integration – visions that remained more or less coherent and elaborated depending on the groups. Variation within groups was also detected, mostly due to the MEPs'

national affiliation. This concluding section summarises each group's positions on FoE in relation to the classification of constitutional narratives (see Góra et al. 2026 in this volume).

The EPP groups each showed a large amount of variation, making it difficult to categorise them. Indeed, differences in reforms and policy proposals could be noted depending on the MEPs' national affiliation and domestic party. Research has already shown the plurality of the EPP regarding internal issues related to Hungary and Poland's democratic backsliding (Meijers, and van der Veer 2019; Herman, Hoerner, and Lacey 2021). In this perspective, we concluded that the EPP's vision of FoE overall followed a republican intergovernmentalism constitutional narrative, with some nuances going closer to either intergovernmentalism or federalism under certain conditions. This point is clearly exemplified by the discussion on reforming the Eurozone, which remained an ambiguous topic for the EPP group. Several of its members indeed favoured the harmonisation of the Eurozone to a high level (i.e. with a ministry dedicated to Eurozone affairs), while other EPP MEPs rejected this idea completely and opposed deeper centralisation.

The S&D's position on FoE appeared to be quite explicit and coherent among MEPs: the EU's competences, capacities and role in the world need to be strengthened. In this perspective, the constitutional narrative favoured by the S&D is that of a multi-headed federal-type Union, whereby the EU is gradually to become a federation with strong supranational institutions. S&D MEPs also reflected extensively on the EU's role in the international arena and the promotion of values and democracy, and in this way, some notes of regional cosmopolitanism could be discerned.

The ALDE and Renew groups advocated for deepening EU integration, which included strengthening of EU institutions - especially the EP and the EC - and consolidation of the euro. ALDE/Renew MEPs strongly focused on economic issues and the need for the EU to develop its economic capacities, notably with a dedicated Eurozone budget and governance. In this sense, the groups share a federalist vision of FoE, edging towards a de-coupled federal-political Union. The group's position on DI was ambiguous, however, with several calls in favour but also against. Consequently, it remains unclear how the governance would function between Eurozone and non-Eurozone members. Overall, the

groups stressed the need to boost the EU's (economic) growth and competitiveness.

Similarly to the S&D group, the Greens/EFA favoured a multi-headed federal-type Union for Europe's future. This group's MEPs stressed the importance of reforming the EU to allow more power to supranational institutions, notably the EP, but most importantly strengthening democracy in the EU by further involving citizens. The Greens/EFA especially highlighted the need for the EU to fully take charge in the field of climate and environmental protection, and consequently set standards for the world.

GUE/NGL tended to have a paradoxical and unclear position on the future of Europe. While in the analysed debates the group rather favoured proposals made at the EU level, notably giving more competences to the EU when it comes to the protection of rights and social matters, it was also extremely critical of EU institutions and the way politics was being done in the EU. Critical of globalisation, the group was also unwilling to develop the EU's economic policy, asking for a human rights and social-oriented shift of the EU. In this sense, it followed a non-linear trajectory between an intergovernmentalist perspective and a multi-headed federal-type union. Indeed, the Left group deeply disapproved of the neo-liberal economic doctrine of the EU and in this area attempted to restrict the EU's competences. However, when it comes to citizens' rights and social policy, GUE/NGL substantially favoured reforms being on the EU level, with the prospect of achieving greater homogeneity and uniformisation amongst member states.

Finally, the ECR, EFDD, ENF and ID groups shared a similar vision of the future of Europe: that power needs to be given back to member states. As noted by Styczyńska and Thevenin (2026 in this volume), there were very few actual reforms proposed by MEPs from these groups, but rather criticism over the way the EU currently functions. In this perspective, these groups exemplified a sovereignist version of intergovernmentalism where member states' sovereignty is the prime element to be safeguarded.

In every vision of the future of European integration, the question of democracy remains central to all parliamentary groups. While some groups requested reforms specifically designed to counter the perceived lack of democratic legitimacy of the EU (e.g. establishing the Spitzenkandidat process, strengthening the EP powers – favoured

notably by ALDE/Renew, S&D, Greens/EFA and several EPP members), several others claimed that the only way to make the EU more democratic was to give power back to member states (claimed by GUE/NGL, ECR, EFDD, ENF and ID groups, as well as several EPP members).

The last 2024 EU elections reflected many of the trends discussed here, notably the growing right-wing influence highlighting the uncertainty surrounding the EU's future. This shift could complicate efforts to deepen integration or expand the powers of EU institutions, as many far-right parties advocate for returning powers to member states, further fuelling debates on the EU's democratic legitimacy.

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Appendix 1

List of selected parliamentary debates

<i>Title of debate</i>	<i>Date of debate</i>	<i>Number of speakers</i>	<i>Number of Speeches</i>	<i>Link to debate</i>	<i>Code of debate</i>
Debate with the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, on the Future of Europe	2018-04-17	42	44	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-04-17-ITM-004_EN.html	EP_2018-04-17_FoE
Debate with the Prime Minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, on the Future of Europe	2018-07-04	33	36	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-07-04-ITM-004_EN.html	EP_2018-07-04_FoE
Debate with the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, on the Future of Europe	2018-11-13	38	43	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-11-13-ITM-008_EN.html	EP_2018-11-13_FoE
Debate with the President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic, Giuseppe Conte, on the Future of Europe	2019-02-12	32	36	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2019-02-12-ITM-018_EN.html	EP_2019-02-12_FoE
European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe	2020-01-15	89	109	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-01-15-ITM-006_EN.html	EP_2020-01-15_FoE
State of play of the implementation of the own resources roadmap	2021-06-08	20	22	part1: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-06-08-ITM-004_EN.html part2: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-06-08-ITM-006_EN.html	EP_2021-06-08_FoE
Euro area recommendation - Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union	2015-12-15	79	98	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2015-12-15-ITM-003_EN.html	EP_2015-12-15_Eurozone
Possible evolutions of and adjustments to the current institutional set-up of the European Union - Improving the functioning of the European Union building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty - Budgetary capacity for the Eurozone	2017-02-14	84	98	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-02-14-ITM-003_EN.html	EP_2017-02-14_Eurozone
Economic policies of the euro area	2017-10-25	26	32	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-10-25-ITM-013_EN.html	EP_2017-10-25_Eurozone
Employment and social policies of the euro area	2019-10-10	26	32	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-10-10-ITM-003_EN.html	EP_2019-10-10_Eurozone

Economic policies of the euro area 2020 – Employment and social policies of the euro area 2020	2020-10-21	29	32	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-21-ITM-007_EN.html	EP_2020-10-21_Eurozone
European Central Bank – Annual report 2020	2021-02-08	25	27	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-02-08-ITM-013_EN.html	EP_2021-02-08_Eurozone
Report of the extraordinary European Council meeting (23 April 2015) – The latest tragedies in the Mediterranean and EU migration and asylum policies	2015-04-29	89	111	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2015-04-29-ITM-003_EN.html	EP_2015-04-29_Migration
Conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council on migration (14 September 2015)	2015-09-16	86	90	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2015-09-16-ITM-009_EN.html	EP_2015-09-16_Migration
Decision adopted on the Common European Asylum System reform	2016-05-11	61	70	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2016-05-11-ITM-014_EN.html	EP_2016-05-11_Migration
Reform of the EU asylum and migration policy in light of the continued humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and Africa	2019-01-15	41	44	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2019-01-15-ITM-002_EN.html	EP_2019-01-15_Migration
Migration situation at the Greek-Turkish border and the EU's common response to it	2020-03-10	61	70	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-03-10-ITM-012_EN.html	EP_2020-03-10_Migration
The escalating humanitarian crisis on the EU-Belarusian border, in particular in Poland	2021-11-10	55	56	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-11-10-ITM-012_EN.html	EP_2021-11-10_Migration

Note: Technical interventions by EP presidents and/or EP vice-presidents are excluded from analysis.

Appendix 2

Political parties

<i>Name of the Party</i>	<i>Electoral result (in%)</i>	<i>Number of seats</i>	<i>Party family</i>
8th parliamentary term (2014–2019)			
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	24.4	191	Social democracy
European People's Party (EPP)	23.8	221	Christian democracy
The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	7.3	50	Green / Ecologist
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	7	67	Liberal
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)	6.6	48	Right-wing
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	5.6	52	Communist / Socialist
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	5.2	70	Conservative
Non-attached Members (NI)		52	
9th parliamentary term (2019–2024)			
European People's Party (EPP)	21	182	Christian democracy
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	18.5	154	Social democracy
Renew Europe (Renew)	13	108	Liberal
The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	11.7	74	Green / Ecologist
Identity and Democracy (ID)	10.8	73	Right-wing
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	8.2	62	Conservative
Non-attached Members (NI)		57	
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	6.5	41	Communist / Socialist