

The European Democracy Lab

Narrative Report

“National Parliaments and European Democracy”



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1. Introduction

The project is part of the core funding of the European Democracy Lab and was submitted to the Open Society Initiative for Europe in 2014 as a follow-up project of the “*Trilogy for the Future of Europe.*” After Dr. Ulrike Guérot, together with Robert Menasse, had published *the Manifesto for a European Republic*¹ and set up a new platform for thought and debate about a “different Europe,” the *National Parliaments and European Democracy Project* was the second hands-on project of the EDL. Setting out as an attempt to reframe the policy discussion on European democracy and to move it out of the deadlock of “more/less Europe”, the project sought to involve and sensitize experts and parliamentarians in different Eurozone countries to this topic.

Due to the methodical adaptations and challenges in terms of staff and financing, it became clear along the way that this would deal more with the question of *whether* the cooperation and coexistence of national parliaments within a European political system presents insurmountable hurdles, *where* the difficulties are located and *if and how* they differ from each other depending on the country being examined. The idea was to also explore *how* these national deputies and experts regard that the system could be changed, also with respect to the approaches of promoting new ways of thinking about this subject.

The subject matter of the project *National Parliaments and European Democracy* was to explore what national deputies and experts in different Eurozone countries think about the relationship between the National Parliament to the European Parliament and the connection with the EP working structures in their daily work as well as to explore their ideas on how the relations and structures could potentially be improved. Through this project, awareness is raised for the European dimension of each and every national legislation act and also ownership is given to national deputies to design their involvement in a future “crossed legitimacy” system of the EU.

The following pages will walk you through an introductory segment talking about the political background of the project as well as the current scientific debate on European Parliamentarianism. It is further explained how the research design has been developed. The main section is the evaluation of the interviews described in the findings of the country. An overall summary of the findings as well as comparing the findings of each country and to the previous project can be found in the evaluation and comparative study at the end.

1.1. Political background of the project

The European election results were dominated by a wave of European populism and consequently, the role of the European Parliament, as democratic body of the EU, changed. Not only did the election campaigns of Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz have a politicizing effect on the elections and the Parliament as such, but also the connection between national parliaments with the new European parliament became far more pressing. The “Spitzenkandidaten” Idea was a tool for

1 U. Guérot & R. Menasse, „Manifest zur Begründung einer Europäischen Republik“, In: FAZ & Die Presse, 24. März 2013. <http://diepresse.com/home/presseamsonntag/1379843/Manifest-fur-die-Begrundung-einer-Europaeischen-Republik>



animating the EP elections differently and for bringing them somehow closer to the interests of citizens in a moment in time where the EU had created a lot of disappointment and frustration and its input legitimacy was being increasingly brought into question. The crisis years after 2008 have led to an increase in technocracy and Europe's citizens sought ways of ending the disconnect they felt from political decisions and – in many cases – even of the perceived suppression by Brussels. Populist arguments hence easily fueled such frustrations – especially in times of economic difficulty and of growing inequality. The public debate was largely dominated by national interests and politics were shaped by how the EU member states played their self-interests against one another. In addition, voter turnout at European elections is generally low and was with an average of 43% especially low in 2014. The need for redefining and redesigning the input legitimacy of the EU institutions – and the EU's power in general – was palpable in the political climate all across the EU; but also the worries that a low turnout in the EP elections would further fuel the arguments of the populists and enemies of the EU that Europe is not relevant and too far away from citizens. It was against the backdrop of this political environment that the research design of this project was developed, as the research and the project wanted to build a bridge between national and European legitimacy by getting national deputies interested in the question of European democracy and by giving them ownership when it comes to shaping European parliamentarianism and their own role in it. In doing so, the project deliberately moved out of existing structures of cooperation between the national and the European level as they exist through the interparliamentary assembly of national deputies from EU member countries, as set forth in Article 113 of the Lisbon Treaty. The interparliamentary assembly is a quite recent phenomenon which has not triggered much media attention or otherwise – and, based on first oral reports, it is fair to assume that it has not gained much attention from the national deputies themselves. The political background for this project was therefore the belief that the European system at large is heading in the wrong direction, when investing into an interparliamentary assembly, which is essentially only adding one more political body to the complexity and opacity of the EU's institutions. The leading idea for this project stood in opposition, namely that other means and ideas must be found in order to increase the spectrum of cooperation between the national and the European parliamentary level, without adding just another format. The idea was more about finding appropriate, concrete and operative means of making national and European parliamentarians work together on a daily basis encompassing all policy issues. With this – so the idea – one could refute the harsh criticism of Eurosceptics that national parliamentarians don't have a say in European policy making – a criticism voiced especially loudly in Berlin and which has eroded the legitimacy of EU policy. In short: providing ownership for national MPs in European affairs was the core idea for this project in order to counter vivid, loudly voiced and partially justified criticisms from Eurosceptics.

When asking what the future of the European Union may be, it is asking what role national parliaments may have and thus what future awaits national representation in relation to the European Parliament. In order to counter a trend fueling (parliamentarian) renationalization, this EP legislation phase is a unique time to launch a broad public discussion about “crossed legitimacy” between national parliaments and their elected members and the European Parliament and its MEPs. It is a moment in time for making tangible contributions and for debating how a full-fledged



transnational democracy² in Europe could be formed, starting with the Eurozone.³ The project, therefore, taps into current policy discussions and intends to lift them to a broader public. Yet, the project is also closely connected to the current scientific debate on European democracy and especially European parliamentarism.

1.2. The scientific debate on European Parliamentarism

The role of national legislatures in the political system of the EU first received political and academic attention in the mid 1990s, in connection with the debates on how to cure the deficit in democracy. Since then, national parliaments have responded and adapted to the existence of the European parliament and its effect on European democracy – individually and in some cases jointly. Ways through which horizontal coordination is increased among national parliaments of EU member states or through which vertical links between national parliaments with the European Parliament are created have hence become a growing research area. Especially cooperative approaches of institutional adaptation – the European Affairs Committee (EAC) and COSAC – to an altered political environment have attracted some academic research. Despite overarching effects and improved cooperation, when examining these broader effects Raunio (2009) in his study finds depoliticizing effects for national parliaments. Mainly because these new structures offer opportunities for cross-party cooperation and enhance closed-door policy making (p. 317f). Furthermore, “domestic change has often been incremental and path-dependent, with the implemented reforms in the older EU countries reflecting the parliamentary cultures” – creating new committees for cooperation on European issues is hence a path fostering an “old” vs. “new” EU member state asymmetry. Raunio however concludes that at the core of assessing the effects of the Europeanization of national legislatures and parliaments lies the unaddressed question how it can be effectively measured – an argument which Winzen (2012) takes as a starting point when discussing the findings of his complementary study on how national parliaments in the EU have sought formal ways for controlling EU affairs between 1958 and 2010. Through measuring three sets of indicators the study finds that information access and processing have become more sophisticated over time in most countries, yet parliaments are still reluctant to adopt more forceful means to tie governments to their preferences. Both Winzen and Raunio find that culturally dependent differences in parliamentary structures and their subsequent behavior can help to explain the rather strong variation in how parliaments adjust to meet their needs. In general, research points to the fact that national parliaments have had a learning curve in recent years and are able to control European Affairs better today than in the past. Most countries have installed control features or specific methods for cooperating with or controlling

² Democracy in the sense of a full-fledged division of power system with a strong legislative and executive body, see: Westerwelle Report on the Future of Europe, 17 September 2012: http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Europa/Aktuell/120918-Zukunftsgruppe_Warschau_node.html

³ There is a tangible policy dynamic in favor of deeper Eurozone integration (political, fiscal and budgetary) in order to circumvent difficult treaty changes on EU 28 level, with the argument that the Euro-countries do have the right (and need) to integrate more, because they have been given up on exchange rate mechanism, see: <http://www.glienickergruppe.eu/>; <http://www.groupe-eiffel.eu/>

the EP. There is a general assessment that “Northern” parliaments do slightly better in achieving this than “Southern” parliaments do, but all have adapted to European reality.

One further scholarly paper that addresses the crucial points of the project from the vertical perspective – improved cooperation between the national parliaments of EU member states with the European Parliament and further European institutions – shall be mentioned briefly: An analysis by Cooper (2013) of the Lisbon Treaty and the Protocol 2 TEU/TFEU which together present a somewhat mixed image of the role of national parliaments in connection with the European Parliament but would allow a tricameral structure on the European level. The study then discusses normative arguments against a third-nation representational chamber with empirical findings to ultimately lay open which alternative ways of interconnecting the national level with the European governance level through the creation of an additional chamber within the European Parliament. However, the counterargument is that the creation of an additional body only adds to the opacity of the system and that the legislative role of this chamber squeezed between the national parliaments and the European Parliament is not clear. It should also be remembered that, from the historical perspective, this would basically be a setback, as the EC, the predecessor of the EU, had such an interparliamentary assembly composed by national MPs. The goal of the Electoral Act from 1976 was precisely to overcome this principle of only national representation and to create greater ties between the European citizens and the European integration project through direct elections. The electoral act was established to create more awareness for European affairs through general and direct elections at the European level – with not overwhelming, but still some success so far. Going back to a European assembly composed by national MPs would abandon this initial goal and go against the ambitions of the EP.⁴

This selection of scholarly articles is only a superficial reflection on the scientific debate around the questions of how European democracy can be improved – especially with respect to improving the legitimacy of European decisions by increasing the impact of national parliaments within the European policy circle. The objectives of the *Trilogy Project* do not directly build on the research presented here; but it is important to note that the scientific debate, as much as the political and societal debate have identified several current shortcomings of European democracy. This project therefore actively includes people of all three of these spheres when raising questions about these pressing issues and when trying to collect feasible solutions for a better future.

⁴ See Olivier Costa, *The History of European electoral reform and the Electoral Act 1997*. Study. European Parliament History Series. EPRS – European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2016 – PE 563.516, p. 11 & following



2. Research Design

The design of the research project had to be changed throughout the project for a variety of reasons. In the end, 23 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in three different Eurozone countries: Finland (9), Slovenia (10) and Portugal (4). In each country, the interviewee's background was either a member of the national parliament (different parties also represented) or civil servants both from the EU and the national level. Why and how the research was carried out in detail is described in the following.

2.1. Changes during the project

The initial idea of the project was to develop – in six national workshops – concrete measures through which national parliamentarians can cooperate better both transnationally and with the European Parliament, thus improving legitimacy on both levels (“crossed legitimacy”). As a result of these workshops, special attention was to be put on how cooperation between national parliaments and the European Parliament can be improved, each reflecting the national priorities, urgencies and national deputies' difficulties in dealing with both levels in their work. Special attention would be given to issues relating to:

- the right of the legislative initiative of the European Parliament
- complementarity between legislative and budgetary period on the European level
- formation of a Eurozone-Parliament
- the idea of *Res Publica Europaea*

The aim of the project was to promote a concept of “crossed legitimacy” between MPs and MEPs and to support the creation of a transnational parliamentary network. In achieving the former, the project sought to provide a space for a transnational dialogue and momentum for change on some of the most pressing issues regarding European Democracy.

The latter was originally planned to be carried out through funded collaborations with local institutions, whereby the EDL would organize workshops on European Democracy with national deputies. In the first phase of the project, the interest in collaborations with the Lab by local partners in these six different countries was sufficient. Yet, the sheer impossibility for these organizations and institutions to pay overhead costs as part of any collaboration was made very clear despite several attempts. Although immense ambition was present and several attempts were made, it was impossible to secure additional funding for the national workshops. This despite the fact that some parliaments, e.g. the Finnish one, demonstrated elevated interest in the project from the beginning. The Lab had high level contacts to parliamentarians in several EU countries and also involved embassies (e.g. the Dutch embassy in Berlin), yet still could not acquire the necessary overhead (Please note: one structural problem was that overhead cannot be budgetized in cooperation with public institutions). Furthermore, due to the intense focus on European migration issues in some of the countries during Autumn 2015, project related issues had to be postponed. In the Trilogy project, these problems could be circumvented as it was possible, e.g. in Paris, to do the project on behalf of the President of the Assemblée Nationale. This unfortunately did not succeed with other parliaments.

As a consequence, the methodology of the project was reduced to a financially manageable effort in the time which remained: Through qualitative face-to-face interviews, the idea was to understand the similarities and differences in connecting the national and the European perspective in terms of how well the parliaments work together. The aim was to identify chances and opportunities for improving democracy in Europe and to ultimately understand where there is room to maneuver within the existing treaties and whether there might be opportunities worth exploring further. Conducting interviews in Finland, Slovenia and Portugal supports the idea of obtaining a geographical balance. Moreover, countries of the Eurozone have been chosen, because of the idea that being in the same economic area also further increases the need for cooperation and policy adjustment.

The purpose of the research interviews is to explore the views, experiences and beliefs of experts and member of national parliaments on how the national and the European level in the different countries in the Eurozone work together. These interviews were, in this case, also particularly appropriate for exploring such a sensitive topics, about which participants may not want to talk about in a group environment.

2.2. Interviews

Within the project, 23 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in three different Eurozone countries: Finland (9), Slovenia (10) and Portugal (4). In each country the interviewee's background was either a member of the national parliament (different parties also represented) or civil servants both from the EU and the national level.

The interview guidelines include the following eight questions and can also be found in the appendix of this document:

- 1) How would you explain your position and tasks?
- 2) In your daily work life, what proportion would you say has a European connection?
- 3) How would you describe the relation between the Eurozone and the EU28?
- 4) What differences and similarities do you see between the Finnish/ Slovenian/ Portuguese Parliamentary System and the European?
- 5) What would you describe as the major problems of the EU in connecting the national and European level?
- 6) How do you think the EU could become more effective and democratic?
- 7) Which alternative concepts (for) re-arranging European institutions and mechanisms do you know?
- 8) Anything you think is important to be mentioned that we did not touch upon so far?

Interviews in all three countries took place in the year 2016: Victoria Kupsch and Johanna Schelle conducted the interviews in Helsinki, Finland in February of this year. The following two interview sessions were carried out by Victoria Kupsch by herself. She was in Ljubljana, Slovenia at the end of March and in Lisbon, Portugal in July. All of the interviews were face-to-face interviews and in average about 30 minutes long. After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed and can be found in an anonymous form in the appendix of this document.



3. Findings

3.1. Slovenia

Slovenia's self-perception with regards to the EU and other member states focuses on having little political influence since it is a small member state situated at the periphery of the EU. Historically, it regards itself as a country which has always been serving or supporting bigger players such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Yugoslavia. This "culture" is reflected today, on the one hand, in proudly regarding itself as a very orderly member of the EU, especially with regards to adapting guidelines. On the other hand, highly influential players of the EU such as Germany or France seem to be accepted unquestioningly, but also serve as an effective way of pursuing Slovenia's own interests and ways of earning respect by aligning with them. Furthermore, Slovenia's membership is regarded as a way of being economically competitive with countries such as the US, China, etc.

As far as the country's political position within the EU is concerned, there is a wide support of Slovenia's membership in both the Eurozone and the European Union despite some critique with regards to the handling the financial crisis and its effect on Slovenia after 2008. For most of the interviewees, both memberships seem to be the best for the country and its people, however rather unconsciously since they regard them as the only option. Germany, especially in combination with France as a tandem EU leadership, is regarded as a close ally in EU and Eurozone policy making. Germany's capability to lead has been questioned several times and seen as undermining Italy's role, a country that is seen as a second important ally.

When raising questions about the comparison and connection between the Slovenian and the European parliamentary systems, almost all interviewees see both parliaments as structurally and functionally very similar – except in their size and the extent of lobbying (both of which are much bigger in den European Parliament). At the same time, it was mentioned several times that national parliamentarians do not have much experience with the how the EU and its institutions function. Both the national and European parliaments are largely regarded as working quite well in performing their tasks. Very few points of contact were mentioned when describing the connection between Slovenian and European policy making. Most of the time the only two connections mentioned are between members of the same party in Brussels and in the European Parliament, as well as the expert briefings on legislation which is relevant to Slovenia.

Nevertheless, some critique was also directed at European policy making. Most MPs see topics and their political handling as the primary problem in EU policy making, rather than the underlying structures and mechanisms. Especially the migration crisis was mentioned by almost all interviewees in this context. About half of the interviewees referred to a lack of time and high complexity as major problems when working on EU policies and in EU affairs. Particularly, the Slovenian synchronization between government meetings on EU affairs on Thursday afternoons and the parliamentary EU affairs committee meeting on Friday mornings were often mentioned as a further complication, leading to the position that EU affairs are only presented for a rough scan through. There is not enough time for a more in-depth analysis and they are too complex to be understood at just a glance. More generally, there are a few deficits which were mentioned repeatedly: One is the lack of transparency, especially in regards to how the decision-making is carried out, which seems to be too complicated for the citizens to follow. They view the EU as highly influenced by different lobbies, the

industry and by “capital”. Apart from this, it was frequently brought up that the EU is lacking in democracy: There is the elected European Parliament which communicates poorly with the National Parliaments and a strong European Commission which has “only” been appointed.

Ideas and suggestions to overcome problems in EU policy making were – as described above – hardly mentioned and those that were are ideas which can be mostly be applied within the running political system, e.g. the idea of making the system less complex in general. Other than that, ideas such as establishing a federal system on the European level, the vision of a United States of Europe as well as placing more focus on the European regions since these countries deal with similar issues were carefully and cautiously mentioned.

The list below summarizes the topics which were brought up most frequently while conducting the interviews in Slovenia. In general, these are topics interviewees seem to be focusing on when asking questions about the link and the relationship between the national and the European level.

Focus of attention:

- proud, orderly member of the EU/ Eurozone
- Slovenia: little influence on EU level
- feeling of being at the periphery of decision-making in EU
- general widespread support of being in the EU
- EU criticized, but viewed as only option
- few contact points between MEP/ MP
- limited possibility for delving into EU affairs (due to time constraints)
- EU system too complex and lack of transparency
- poor communication between the European parliament and the national parliament
- strong European Commission which is “only” appointed
- solutions mostly within the running political system, e.g. idea of reducing the system’s complexity in general

3.2. Finland

Geographical concerns are often mentioned when talking about the self-perception of Finland with regards to the EU and other member states. Being a – population wise – small country in the northeast of the EU, they describe themselves as being at the periphery of EU decision making and facing a lack of political influence. The EU institutions are described as being far away from Helsinki whereas Russia is very close. The population size and geographical position also seems to be a reason why the Nordic Cooperation is regarded as being the closest reference point in transnational interests and policy making mostly because of similar interests and challenges. Many mentioned the Finnish economy which is not doing well at the moment and a fear of Russia for different reasons ranging from economic sanctions to migration. There seems to be a general feeling of pride in the Finnish political system which is described as working well and playing by the rules as far as their role as an EU member state is concerned. And also the importance of them being in the EU due to their small size.



Finland's political situation within the EU and the Eurozone is described as rather unsatisfactory. The most criticized aspect seems to be the fact that there is little room for maneuvering, especially with regards to economic policies and relations to Russia. There is a strong feeling that Finland pays an unfair price for following the rules when comparing itself with other member states.

The trust in the Finnish parliamentary system is very strongly expressed in all interviews. The national parliament is typically described as very efficient, functional, well-organized and capable of addressing its citizens' interests and needs. All these elements are often put in contrast to the European parliamentary system; additionally, the disconnect between EU Commission and EU Parliament was often the subject of criticism. The EU system as a whole is described with adjectives like inefficient, slow, complicated and complex. Very few points of contact are mentioned when describing the connection between Finnish and EU policy making. Instead, the discussion is mainly centered around the fact that requirements and structures in each EU country are very different and therefore national issues should be dealt in the national parliaments and European concerns in the European Parliament. In reality, however, the perception is that the EU political system forces itself upon the national political debate and is largely dominated by the national debates of its member states. As a consequence, there is often no European answer to European problems.

Major problems in regards to EU policy making which were repeatedly mentioned is the EU migration crisis and solidarity. There seems to be a perception of being exposed to rather unpredictable and surprising EU regulations which seem to put Finland in a passive role. It is especially the experts who stress the dysfunctional structures as a primary and major problem in EU policy making. Among the frequently mentioned issues are the lack of control of both the European Council and Commission by the Parliament, the lack of transparency of the European perspective and work of MEPs, the complexity of decision-making, the lack of clear responsibility in power relationships as well as the lack of democracy due to the top-down mechanism. Furthermore, the stark disconnect between the citizens and EU policy making as well as the great influence of the media on the perception of the EU is regarded as highly problematic.

Ideas and suggestions for overcoming problems in EU policy making are quite diverse. On the one hand, there is a feeling of helplessness in regard to constructive solutions to the complex and pressing issues the EU is facing; and most of them doubt that much change in the system is possible. Closer connections and direct communication system as well as visibility for a wider general public are the lowest common denominators. Some expressed the opinion that the EU should concentrate on the economy and its market only, be good and stop doing things that do not work well. Others, however, would like the EU play a more important role by starting to work on wider European issues such as climate change, tax havens, immigration, defense policy, etc. At the same time, they favor leaving smaller issues to the national level because the countries in the EU have different requirements and cultures which need to be addressed through different solutions. On the other hand, especially among the experts interviewed, there were isolated suggestions on how the structures and mechanisms can be changed, ranging from a clear federal structure on the European level on which the EU should obtain further responsibilities in decision-making to a more direct democracy with equal rights for all citizens within the EU. In general, some of the ideas push in the direction of making the system more flexible, clearer, simpler, more open and more connected to the people.

The list below summarizes the topics which were raised the most frequently during the interviews in Finland. In general, these are topics interviewees focused on when posed questions about the link and relationship between the national and the European level.

Focus of attention:

- Finland: little influence on EU level
- feeling of being at the periphery of decision-making in EU
- fear of Russia (economic sanctions/migration) in combination with lack of understanding from EU perspective
- importance of Nordic cooperation
- pride, orderly member within EU system
- critique of weak European Parliament and strong European Commission
- EU described as inefficient, slow, complicated, complex
- too few points of contact between national and European level
- need for European answer to European problems
- feeling of helplessness in regards to constructive solutions
- system should be more flexible, clearer, simpler, more open, more connected to the people

3.3. Portugal

As far as Portugal's self-perception and its role within the EU and the Eurozone is concerned, the topic of being financially dependent on the EU was often mentioned. There seems to be a general fear of being pushed out of the Eurozone for failing to meet the deficit reduction targets. Most of the interviewees do not regard Portugal as an active member of the EU, especially because the EU is regarded as a competition rivalry for influence and Portugal is not powerful enough. This competition also seems to happen between the members of the National Parliament and the EP.

The latter is also an indicator for a difficult relationship between the EU and national legislators. One factor that is mentioned is the lack of support staff for dealing with EU issues. Other than this, interviewees expressed that they miss a connection between the EU and its citizens and also speak of a gap between their lives and the numerous decisions made on the EU level. Furthermore, they criticized a lack of legitimacy of the EP coming from the people as well as the European Commission which makes rulings but whose members have not been elected by the people. In general, the connection between the European level and its citizens was widely discussed, taking center stage due to the Brexit referendum, which was held just before the interviews took place. There seems to be a paradoxical situation since the country is very dependent on the EU on the one hand but, on the other hand, many people regard EU membership as constraining.

Another issue that was talked about extensively was the Euro in combination with Portugal's stagnating economic situation. Reducing the deficit is taking up much of the country's efforts. Moreover, the country's decapitalized banking system makes it unable for companies to get loans. As far as the European level is concerned, there is a feeling of being very dependent on a system that is unjust.



A few ideas and suggestions for an improved European system were put forward: Solidarity, leading the EU and a longing for a strong EU were the main topics. There is general agreement that the EU system is not working well and that improvement should move in the direction of more transparency. A stronger leadership as well as more decisions on topics like external affairs are needed. Also, the idea of setting up a kind of federal system on the European level was mentioned, while stressing the perception that this is quite an unrealistic and difficult topic after the Brexit referendum and prevalent Euroscepticism in Portugal.

The list below summarizes the topics which were mentioned the most frequently while conducting the interviews in Portugal. In general, these are topics interviewees focused on when asked questions about the link and relationship between the national and the European level.

Focus of attention:

- dependence of Portugal on the EU vs. perception of the EU as constraining
- Euro deficit problem -> economic stagnation
- rivalry (between EU and Portugal) and within the EU
- limited possibilities for dealing with EU affairs (staff constraints)
- lack of communication and connection between the EU and citizens
- feeling dependent on a system that is (at least partly) unjust
- solutions: more transparency, EU leadership, different political system



4. Evaluation and comparative analysis

From all 23 of the interviews conducted in the three different Eurozone countries, the focus of attention when talking about cooperation and the quality of both political levels working together lies on the following issues: Out of the perspective of these small countries, they see their national level as having very little influence on the European decision-making process and agenda setting. Vice versa, EU decisions – in some cases regarded as being rather unpredictable – have an influence on these countries. And the national level finds itself being judged continuously for how well EU directives are implemented. As a result, interviewees also evaluate themselves in regards to “fitting into the system,” “following the rules” or having to worry about being “kicked out.”

In addition to the “scenario factor” EU, the existence of the two levels and the cooperation with each other resembles a power game. Their coexistence is seen very much under the perspective of who has more power, e.g. the national parliaments or the European parliament, or other European institutions. This can be regarded as an indicator that the duality of a national and a European level is rather seen as competitive than as complementary systems. Also within the EU system, the discussion centers closely around the topic of which European institution has more power. Specifically, the European Parliament is compared with the European Commission. There seems to be a tendency towards criticism that the European Parliament has less power than the European Commission, which is regarded as problematic since the members of the latter are appointed and not directly elected as is the case with the members of the Parliament.

Moreover, the communication and flow of information as well as the cooperation between the two levels is an issue which is widely discussed regardless of the country. Especially in Slovenia and Portugal there are particular issues (time and staff constraints) which limit their ability to deal with EU affairs appropriately.

Furthermore, there seems to be a general tendency of, on the one hand, being “grateful” for being in the EU. On the other hand, the interviewees have certain issues – depending on the country – where they do not feel “understood” and supported enough (e.g. fear of Russia, Euro deficit problem).

All in all, the system is mostly regarded as too complex and not transparent enough. Adjectives which are often used to describe the system are “inefficient,” “slow,” “complicated” and “complex.” There is a strong tendency of feeling dependent or of having a malfunctioning system, which is seen – subconsciously – either as the only solution or the only one that is possible.

With regards to ideas for alternative concepts for rearranging European institutions and mechanisms, many answers were rather reserved. Rarely, a few single concrete ideas were mentioned with great skepticism. There seems to be a rough understanding in which direction a solution could be going, however. In general, the system should be less complex, more transparent, more open, simpler and more connected to the people. Also, the wish and the need for a European “leader” or face was brought up a few times. In general, however, people are overwhelmed when it comes to suggesting clear ideas for possible solutions. Some raise the subject of a different political system which would be necessary, but only very few have concrete ideas and many feel helpless with regard to constructive solutions.



All in all, the interviewees mainly focused on the following topics when they were interviewed:

- self-assessment in regards to the “performance” of a member state in the EU/the Eurozone
- feelings of being at the periphery of decision-making in EU combined with limited possibility of handling EU affairs (due to time or staff constraints)
- insufficient points of contact or poor communication between the European parliament and their national parliament
- rivalry and competitiveness between European and national level, as well as within the EU
- EU system in general regarded as too complex with an extensive lack of transparency and communication, especially between the EU and its citizens
- critique of weak European Parliament and strong European Commission, which is “only” appointed
- EU criticized, but mostly regarded as the only political European solution. Suggestions mostly within the running political system, e.g. idea to make the system in general less complex. General feeling of helplessness in regard to generating constructive solutions.

Initially, the idea was to also explore *how* the opinions of these national deputies and experts regarding the system could be changed. With respect to daring approaches of promoting new ways of thinking on a subject so big and, at the same time, very sensitive, many of the politicians involved on a day-to-day basis are not used to challenging it, nor do they have much practice doing so. The latter is possibly the reason for why the interviewees did not have many ideas about how the system could be changed.

As a consequence, there is a shared understanding for most of the interviewees that the current political situation has a lot in common with the current pressing need for action and that only a united European Union can successfully address the challenges of both the near and the more distant future. Most of them share the view that, in an increasingly global world and transnational reality, nation states will hardly be able to meet people’s expectations with respect to social, economic and security questions. However, with diminished trust in democracy and, respectively, in political leaders, it was also said that Europe’s citizens need to be included in political decisions more directly: Europe has to become more real to those living there every day, accepting and valuing differences is easier said than done and yet necessary. Nevertheless, it was difficult to engage the interviewees in a solution-oriented discussion on how the system could be changed. Despite a few ideas, conversations rather revolved around judging what is working well and where there are deficits.

When comparing these findings with the “*Trilogy for the Future of Europe*” project, which was much more aimed at generating ideas on *how* the European political system could be changed, one can observe that the *Trilogy* findings were heading into a different, more solution-orientated direction. This is mainly due to the fact that solutions can be discussed and developed more effectively in a workshop than in an interview setting. Nevertheless, the “*National Parliaments and European Democracy*” project identified a number of concerns and topics which might never have been brought up in an open workshop setting.

In a way, the interviews however did not generate diametrically opposed positions or opinions of the interviewed MP of several countries on what European democracy and parliamentarianism should



be; and almost all confirmed that the necessity of a common European future is not put into question. The frustration or – to put it another way – the perceived malfunctioning of the current structures is also a shared item among many of them. All three of these points together give leeway for improving the national/European cooperation features with respect to a crossed legislative body under a new form of European parliamentarianism. A comparative finding could also have been that there are vast cultural divergences between national MPs from one country to another. Yet, they are only minor. This leads us to argue that, although the concrete and better performing mechanisms of European parliamentarianism combining national and European level still must be found, the willingness to work on European parliamentarianism is there and no fundamental hurdle could be detected indicating that European democracy *per se* is in a cul-de-sac. It is also interesting to observe that MPs of smaller member states feel their powerlessness in influencing European legislation – whereas deputies from larger EU member states, especially Germany, voice precisely the goal of having this power. Balancing out smaller and bigger EU member countries (and implicitly the power of their MPs) therefore seems to be another imperative of a future European development. Any institutional structure of the EU must make sure that dominance structures exercised by larger member countries on smaller ones – be that in the Council or in Parliament – be avoided.

In summary, these findings appeal largely to the framing of the Lab's core idea, that European sovereignty must be decoupled from member states and given back to citizens on an 'one-person-one-vote basis,' overcoming the national representation in the EU council and thus the risk of large countries dominating others. A different European parliamentary system within a redefined bicameralism, in which regional entities/parliaments could be allotted weighted representation, while European citizens would enjoy voting equality, might be an option to think about for the future. This would capture the feelings expressed by the MPs interviewed here, namely that the aggregation of small nations does not make much sense – or does not provide much impact – when it comes to the national parliaments of small member countries. A renewed and reconsidered European parliamentarianism could build on these findings, which speak in favor of ultimately deconstructing the national state including the national parliaments in order to build a better performing and more direct European parliamentarianism, in which the European people are sovereign.



5. Literature

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6. Appendix

6.1. Interview guideline

- 1) **How would you explain your position and tasks?** // What does average work day look like?
- 2) **In your daily work life, what proportion would you say has a European connection** // is related to European affairs?
- 3) **How would you describe the relation between the Eurozone and the EU28**
 - a. What role would you say does your country have in both?
 - b. How do you stay informed about European affairs?
 - i. *Public debates (News & Events)*
 - ii. *Government briefings*
 - iii. *Academic services*
 - iv. *Committee preparations*
 - v. *Party positions*
 - vi. *Personal relations with MEPs*
- 4) **What differences and similarities do you see between the Finnish/ Slovenian/ Portuguese Parliamentary System and the European?**
 - a. Which other countries do you see as comparable to your country
- 5) **What would you describe as the major problems of the EU in the connecting national and European level?**
 - a. *Democracy*
 - b. *Transparency*
 - c. *Participation*
- 6) **How do you think the EU could become more effective and democratic?**
 - i. *Institutions*
 - b. What do think about the balance of powers between the European institutions?
 - i. *National sovereignty*
 - c. How do you see the role of the Finnish/ Slovenian/ Portuguese Government as well as the Eduskunta/ Slovenian/ Portuguese Parliament on the European level?
 - i. *Role of Civil Society // Citizens*
- 7) **Which alternative concepts re-arranging European institutions and mechanisms do you know?**
 - i. *Core Europe*
 - ii. *Glienicker Gruppe & Groupe Eiffel*
 - iii. *Other?*
- 8) **Anything you think is important to be mentioned that we did not touch upon so far?**



6.2. Interviewees

Finland

- 6 Members of the Finnish National Parliament (Eduskunta) - at least one member from all of the parties represented in parliament
- 3 civil servants, from both the EU and national level
 - 1 expert from European Commission Representation in Helsinki
 - 1 expert from European Parliament Representation in Helsinki
 - 1 Committee Counsel (Grand Committee)

Slovenia

- 9 members of the Slovenian National Assembly
- 1 expert from civil society

Portugal

- 3 national deputies
- 1 secretary of state

6.3. Transcriptions of the original interviews (in an anonymous form)

Can be found in an extra document to this report

