



**Partecipazione e Conflitto**

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(2) 2024: 421-443

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i2p421

Published 15 July, 2024

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Imagining the Future of Europe: Is Transnational Left Populism the Way Forward?<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The European Union is facing a 'poly-crisis'. As a result, reflections on the future of Europe have intensified (one example is the Conference on the Future of Europe). In discussing visions of Europe, scholars generally pit cosmopolitanism against communitarianism, or pro-Europeanism against Euro-scepticism. Visions of Europe's future are however more complex and irreducibly plural. The article examines the ideational landscape of the EU by, first, mapping a plurality of prominent, frequently used discourses on European integration. Second, we examine a tendency towards reproducing the status quo in dealing with the poly-crisis. Despite the rich ideational plurality, dominant forces in the EU tend not to be inclined to significantly reform the EU. The third part of the paper examines one exception, in the form of left transnational populism, which proposes a critical, but constructive, alternative understanding of integration. The analysis of this left populist composite, critical Europeanist discourse, focusses on the most developed,

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<sup>1</sup> The authors acknowledge financial support for the research project Transnational populism and European democracy (TRAPpED), Czech Science Foundation (Grantová agentura České republiky) (Standard Project 18-25924S).

even if marginal, transnational left populist project, DiEM25. The article concludes by indicating both the relevance of the critical Europeanist discourse and the formidable, practical obstacles the project faces

**KEYWORDS:** (Conference on the) Future of Europe, Critical Europeanism, DiEM25, Discourse, Populism, Transnational Left Populism

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## 1. Introduction

For some time now, the European Union (EU) is facing multiple crises or a ‘poly-crisis’. As a result, reflections on the future of Europe have intensified. One recent instance of this is the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), of which the purpose was to ‘look forward and forge a vision for our future’ (EC 2020).<sup>2</sup> Despite efforts such as CoFE, collective reflections on the poly-crisis, have not led to any significant upgrading of the EU.

As will be shown by means of analysing various discourses on European integration, there is a strong tendency towards the status quo, or even towards mild forms of disintegration, that is, returning competences to the Member States. European disintegration is in fact not unthinkable, as declining public support and citizen disengagement, the rise of nationalism, increasing socio-economic inequality, and daunting geopolitical and ecological challenges indicate (Webber 2018). The politics of the status quo may pose a risk for supranational integration. EU politics seems dominated by conservative and even regressive forces<sup>3</sup>, which do not acknowledge the crises the EU faces, and/or propose to return to an international system of sovereign nation-states. A forceful suggestion is that EU politics is predominantly about cosmopolitanism (European elites) versus communitarianism (populists and the masses) (De Wilde et al. 2019). There is a risk however of simplification of a reality of a plurality of discursive positions. Furthermore, other cleavages are equally useful, such as the one between status quo versus reformist or even revolutionary positions. Binary distinctions however do not do justice to composite or transversal discourses nor to potentially integrationist positions of some political actors deemed populist.

The paper sets out to map various significant discourses on European integration, including different forms of populism.<sup>4</sup> We particularly focus on left transnational forms of populism or what have been called the ‘critical Europeanists’ (Newell 2022). We investigate left transnational populism to see if, and how, its discourse may be of relevance for the future of Europe. A core expression of transnational left populism can be found in the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25), which is relatively unique as a transnational or pan-European endeavour, rather than a collaboration between national left parties.<sup>5</sup>

We start with theoretical and methodological discussion of discourses of European integration. The paper builds on Dryzek’s discourse analysis (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993) and Boltanski and Thévenot’s pragmatic sociology (2006). The systematic analysis of discourses on (the future of) Europe has been surprisingly absent in political-scientific and sociological debates on European integration (see White 2020) (for exceptions, see Koch 2021; Manners 2013; Patberg 2020), but is much needed in current times of crisis and contemplation on

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<sup>2</sup> The CoFE started in May 2021, to last for a year, and involved 800 randomly European citizens in deliberating 9 broad themes. Citizens’ deliberations ultimately led to a final report with 49 proposals.

<sup>3</sup> While Commission President Von der Leyen famously stated in a speech in Zagreb in September 2019 that ‘[w]e will never let the nationalists and the populists, who want to divide and destroy the European Union, hijack what our European way of life means’, her own party the EPP is in different ways showing affinities with right-wing populists.

<sup>4</sup> While focussing on transnational left populism, we will recognize different positions within left populism, which include sovereigntist ones. See Agustin 2021 for an in-depth discussion of various types of European left populism.

<sup>5</sup> This may also be one of its main weaknesses, that is, its distance to radical left parties in domestic arenas, see Bortun 2023.

the EU's future. In the second part, the article maps the plural 'ideological field', analysing a range of prominent, frequently used discourses on European integration: (neo-)liberalism, federalism, cosmopolitanism, right-wing conservatism/populism, left populism, and participatory democracy. The third part analyses left populism as a composite, critical Europeanist discourse, containing dimensions of cosmopolitanism, federalism and participatory democracy, and situates it in relation to the other discourses. The article concludes by indicating both the relevance of the critical Europeanist discourse and the formidable, practical obstacles it faces in inducing change.

## 2.1. Theoretical framework and method

Visions of European integration are often portrayed in a simplified, polarized fashion; an example is the debate around Brexit. While the suggestion that a new line of conflict consists in cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism (Wilde et al. 2019) is important, an emphasis on this conflict tends to oversimplify the plurality and complexity of positions (see also Koch 2021). A wide range of perceptions of integration exist, many of which cannot be outrightly dismissed as in binary opposition. Some of the main discourses on the EU relate to its 'mythical' origins, notably federal, (ordo-)liberal, and, in fact, cosmopolitan ideas, and are to various degrees close to the formal EU institutions. Others have been gaining ground over time, such as the discourse of participatory democracy, and recently different forms of Euroscepticism, and in a related sense, forms of populism.

In order to make sense of contemporary political debates and conflict regarding European integration and the future of the European project, we need to be able to distinguish singular positions and the discourses that relate to these positions. As argued by John Dryzek, discourses can be understood as a 'shared way of apprehending the world' (2013: 9). Discourses consist of bits of information which can be put together and arranged into more or less coherent stories or accounts. As Dryzek further notes, discourses 'construct meaning and relationships, helping define common sense and legitimate knowledge'. Indeed, '[e]ach discourse rests on assumptions, judgments, and contentions that provide the basic terms from analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements' (Dryzek 2013: 9-10). One distinction one can make regarding discourses on European integration, of significant relevance for the debate on the future of Europe, is between 'prosaic' and 'imaginative' positions. Prosaic positions take the existing situation largely for granted, without questioning key components/institutions/actors or relationships between them. Imaginative accounts, instead, attempt to imagine a different situation, in which European integration might be something rather different from what it is now.

A further difference is between 'reformist' and 'radical' positions (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), where a reformist position indicates a stance that wants to change the existing policies, but not the entire institutional make-up. A radical position, in contrast, wants to change the institutional constellation and the overall framework, imagining a radically different one in its stead (see table 1).

The political discourse analysis presented in the subsequent sections has been the outcome of research and analysis in a three-year research project on European democracy and transnational populism. As we will see below, the project identified six main discourses on European integration, of which transnational populism is one. The discourses were analysed in a number of steps. We selected a number of core texts with regard to specific, general political positions. We identified two types of texts: texts that represented the theoretical-philosophical bases and core principles of a discourse<sup>6</sup> (regarding e.g. neoliberalism or right-wing

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<sup>6</sup> This dimension was inspired by Boltanski and Thévenot's usage of core philosophical texts to tease out general justificatory principles that are used in everyday disputes (2006).

conservatism) as well as texts that were closer to policy-making or public-political claims making in European politics.

**Table 1: Classifying European Discourses**

	<b>Reformist</b>	<b>Radical</b>
<b>Prosaic</b>	Solving the current problems by promoting re-invigorated policies (such as a Green policy, Migration policy, or the Single Market)	Solving problems by proposing a different functioning or novel calibration of the institutions, or by instituting new institutions or policies (e.g., creating new institutions or policies, but within the existing technocratic mindset, such as a European fiscal union).
<b>Imaginative</b>	Re-designing policy-making by, for instance, allowing for significant citizen input/engagement (as in the proposed Conference on the Future of Europe).	Adopting a novel approach to European integration, by shifting power away from existing institutions towards new ones (e.g. creating a citizens' constituent assembly as a novel institution or by replacing the Council by such an assembly).

Source: own elaboration.

The more theoretical texts served to outline the general discourse (e.g. neoliberalism as a general theoretical approach to the economy and to politics), while the more applied, practical texts allowed us to situate such theories and principles in actual European political debates. The texts analysed – hence including both theoretical statements but also more practical ones - were subsequently mapped using Nvivo, conceptually following the political discourse analysis suggested by John Dryzek (building on Stephen Toulmin's work) (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993), using a four-by-four matrix of discursive dimensions.

Distinctive discursive statements were selected and coded according to specific dimensions of discourse (ontology, degrees of agency, motivations, natural/unnatural relationships), as well as types of claims (definitive, designative, evaluative, and advocative claims) (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993: 51-2). By selecting a number of statements from the core texts in relation to the 16 different categories of the matrix, the attempt has been to “catch” a discourse as much as possible in its entirety or in its comprehensiveness (see for one example of a discourse matrix of right/wing populism, Annex 1). In a second step, for all six discourses, texts specifically related to European integration have been selected and included in the political discourse analysis. The singular texts have all been analysed using the discourse matrix. The final matrix per European discourse was subsequently created out of the various singular texts (for an example of the analysis of leftwing populist texts, see annex 1). The selection of texts per discourse identified in a first step core theoretical texts essential to a specific ideological position (e.g. neoliberalism). In a second step, as reported in the following section, we have analysed texts that somehow applied such a position in the context of European integration (e.g. the report by Mario Monti on completing the Single Market). In a third step, for a focussed analysis of transnational left populism (discussed in the third section), more than 30 interviews were held with activists of the Democracy in Europe movement (DiEM25), both on the European and domestic levels (Germany, Italy, Czechia), in the period 2019-2021, complemented by materials from the period 2016-24. The analysis of the transnational left populist argument was at the same time situated within the larger context of the other five discourses. In fact, the interviews were coded on the basis of the discourse matrices of the six discourses, in order to identify a European left-populist discourse in its contrasts and affinities with competing discourses. The brief exposés of the six discourses (in section 3) and of transnational left populism in particular (in section 4) are condensed, narrated forms of the extensive mapping exercise in the project.

### 3. Discourses on (the future of) European integration

The political discourse analysis departs from a plurality - not a binary - of discourses on the EU suggested elsewhere (see table 2), following the ideas of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). Inspired by the latter, we suggest that different discourses may be based on distinctive key justificatory principles and engage in non-binary exploration and reconstruction of European discourses by means of political discourse analysis.

The range of European discourses identified here is not exhaustive. The discourses were selected on the basis of their representativeness of prominent positions on European integration. The selection is inspired by political theoretical work on European integration (e.g. Manners identifies ‘communitarian’, ‘cosmopolitan’, and ‘cosmopolitical’ understandings, Manners 2013; Balli identifies ‘ethnonationalism’, ‘European multilevel identity’, ‘constitutional civic Europeanism’, ‘European consumer polity’, ‘situated Euro-republicanism’ and ‘Europe of diversity and inconsistency’, Balli 2003; Nicolaïdis investigates the -isms of federalism, cosmopolitanism and constitutionalism, Nicolaïdis 2020). The discourses selected arguably provide a comprehensive coverage of prominent understandings of European integration, grounded in different higher principles (rule of law, people or nation, diversity, universal morality, equality, self-government).

The objective was to ‘map’ the terrain of discourses on (the future of) European integration to identify contrasting positions, and spot possible imaginative/creativity positions. The populist argument is of great consequence for our research here, in that it forms one of the main angles of critique on the existing European project, inter alia indicating a distance between elites/institutions and European society. The table identifies two - right-wing and left-wing - populist discourses. Both of these discourses appear to be significantly ‘testing’ the status quo and consist in approaches that radically question the existing situation.

**Table 2. Discourses of European integration**

<b>EU as a:</b>	<b>(Neo-)liberal polity</b>	<b>Right-wing Populist polity</b>	<b>Federal polity</b>	<b>Cosmopolitan polity</b>	<b>Leftwing Populist polity</b>	<b>Participatory democracy</b>
<i>Principles of legitimation</i>	Stability, rule of law, market principle, minimal state	Popular sovereignty	The peoples or demoi	Universal morality	Equality	Self-government
<i>Main actors</i>	Market actors, institutions, courts	Majority, leader, people	Peoples, nations, communities	Individual citizens	Citizens united into political communities	Citizens
<i>Motivation</i>	Legality, individual freedom	Popular will	Sovereignty, representation	Freedom	Horizontal cooperation	Autonomy
<i>Institutional imagination</i>	European legal order grounded in EU law and state constitutions	National constitutional order	United States of European; European Constitution	Key Charters, Conventions, national constitutions, individual human rights	Plurality of channels of civic input; various forms of basic guarantees	Citizens’ assemblies/fora ; participatory (digital) instruments

<i>Scope of politics</i>	Participation based on existing rights	Majoritarian, representative	Multi-level	Inclusion of diversity of political subjects	(Conflictive) politics, beyond formal institutions	Politics beyond institutions, citizen-driven
<i>Vision of the future</i>	Strengthening rule of law, deepening single market	Realizing Europe of the nations or peoples	Realizing a European federation	Strengthening European citizenship	Realizing a social Europe of the citizens	Democratizing the EU by adding participatory dimensions

Source: Own elaboration.

Let us turn to our condensed narration of the six European discourses to illustrate plural positions on European integration and its future. The reconstruction of the discourses is holistic (Blokker 2021) also in the sense that the narrations focus on comprehensive, normative positions of the European project, and are not reduced to merely a part, that is, specific policy positions (e.g. foreign, migration, or defence policy). The discourses are integral to the history of the EU but may equally form the starting point for envisioning its future. The latter aspect is particularly emphasized by showing how distinctive positions have been relevant in the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-22). A core distinction between discourses is their position on the status quo.

### 3.1 (Neo-)liberalism<sup>7</sup>

In neoliberalism, the core justificatory dimension is the liberal idea of emancipatory individualism.<sup>8</sup> The individual is seen to possess creative energy (Hayek: 246; see Davies 2016: 5) and needs to be freed from the coercive presence of authority for her human potential and freedom to be achieved (Hayek: 37). Collective planning may be seen as an ineffective use of resources and even an organization of society that contradicts ‘human nature’ (Thatcher 415). Society aggregates individual interests and channels them towards the best possible outcomes.

The coordination of individual interests is brought about through the (European) market. Any other organization is perceived as unnatural (Hayek 1976: 38). Market coordination may reach beyond the economic domain. Despite the doctrine of deregulation, individual freedom is still curbed by a top-down authoritative framework - namely the rule of law. The rule of law, along with a minimal state, guarantees the absence of fraud, profiteering, or cartels (Thatcher 2002: 329).<sup>9</sup> The state also maintains the monopoly on power and coercion (Friedman: 13; Thatcher: xviii), safeguarding the rules of the game (Friedman 1962: 27).

<sup>7</sup> The core texts selected for the analysis of neoliberalism included Hayek 1976, Friedman 1962, Thatcher 2002, with the addition of Monti 2010. The texts were chosen to delineate both a sample of key intellectual articulations of neoliberalism and its more contemporary manifestation in post-2008 crisis debates about Europe's future.

<sup>8</sup> In the process of selecting key articulations of selected discourses, we observed a lack of relevant public statements by neoliberal forces. This may indicate that neoliberalism is well-established/embedded in the public sphere and that it no longer needs to be heavily spoken for or justified. This point aligns with critical observers who notice that neoliberalism is deeply embedded in culture, society, and institutions.

<sup>9</sup> This version of the rule of law endorsed by neoliberal thinkers and practitioners is a minimalist and instrumentalist view of the rule of law, geared towards the operation of the market, rather than understood as a social good which contrasts abuse of power, see

On the European level, neoliberalism is evident in austerity policies or the indispensable nature of the single market (Monti 2010: 12; see Wilkinson 2021). The European single market is thought of as an engine of wealth and employment. The idea transgresses the economic domain and is meant to empower the citizens so they can ‘become full actors within the single market’ (Monti 2010: 38). Currently, the European project allegedly does not fully realize actors’ freedom. The particular critique from the neoliberal position is ‘market fatigue’ (Monti 2010: 24) or ‘integration fatigue’ (Monti 2010: 6). The post-war idea of the European project safeguarding peace is reiterated in the version of the single market serving as a barrier to economic nationalism (Monti 2010: 31). Monti (2010: 23) evaluates the status quo of single market discussion as being institutionalized in the legal system but not sufficiently “rooted in mindsets”. The deepening of the single market and the indispensable nature of a strong EU rule of law strongly inform the (neo-)liberal view of the future of the European project.

In relation to the CoFE, the pan-European business organization BusinessEurope articulates the neoliberal idea in that ‘citizens benefit from the internal market, with companies creating employment and providing quality jobs’, and that

the basis for all our political and societal projects, whether environmental, social, human rights etc, is a vibrant and healthy economy. Without our companies creating wealth and jobs, nothing can be achieved. This is the foundation for the European Model being attractive internationally and the prerequisite for our cherished European Way of Life... For our businesses, international competitiveness, the Internal Market, and trade are key focus points of the EU. At the same time, we recognise that the EU is about much more than the economy: the EU is also the guardian of a common body of values enshrined in the Treaties, and a guarantor of an open society model in which freedom, creativity and entrepreneurship can thrive. (BusinessEurope 2021: 1-2).

### 3.2 Cosmopolitanism<sup>10</sup>

The cosmopolitan discourse stresses equal individuals as members of a universal or world community. Its core principles include openness, hospitality and the recognition of diversity (Held 2010; Delanty and Harris 2018). The EU approximates a post-national, transborder collective, a form of ‘situated’ cosmopolitanism. Human rights (or a ‘cosmopolitan rights regime’, Beck 2006: 123) form an institutional expression of equality and moral universalism. Cosmopolitans call for a redefinition of the state’s position, either towards a European federal republic (Habermas) or towards states that Europeanize their interests (in contrast to limited national self-interest) (Beck). Both visions however recognize the agency of transnational institutions in the protection of rights and in sustaining peace and estimate the cosmopolitan experience as a change in the way of life (Beck 2013: 76) that seeks new institutional representations. Citizenship becomes disaggregated (Benhabib 2006) from cultural and national belonging, while there is recognition of individuals’ participation in multiple communities. European law ‘takes precedence over domestic law’ (Benhabib 2006: 170) and worth is attributed to non-national forms of belonging (in sharp contrast to e.g. right-wing populism where national forms of belonging are highly valued). Cosmopolitan motivations include the recognition of the multiple institutional affiliations of political actors and the endorsement of multiple channels of representation. The latter regards the EU itself as having an expanded legitimacy and sovereignty, and the European public sphere as being a space of transnational debate.

Krygier 2017. As such, it is rather different from substantive, thick understandings of the rule of law which stress democratic principles and fundamental rights.

<sup>10</sup> The core texts used for the analysis are Beck (2006), Beck (2013), Benhabib (2006), and Habermas (2003), (2015). In addition, we looked at more applied texts such as Volt (n.d.) and Macron (2017).

An important example of a cosmopolitan approach in the contemporary EU is that of the new pan-European party Volt Europe. Volt insists on the transnational nature of the challenges (migration, climate change, the economy), and endorses strong European institutions. It wants to overcome nationalist/sovereignist/populist orientations and the ‘fruitless “old way” of doing politics’<sup>11</sup>. The domination of nation-states in European integration needs to be overcome, while individuals have to be put at the centre of European politics. Volt actively participated in the CoFE process and debates, seeing it as a way of connecting citizens beyond borders: the EU needs ‘a permanent institution tasked to listen to all European citizens. The Conference on the Future of Europe (COFE) is our unique opportunity to transform European politics into a permanent participatory and inclusive exercise of European democracy’ (Volt Toolkit, n.d.).

Another, much more ambiguous, example of a (partial) cosmopolitan position<sup>12</sup> is that of Emmanuel Macron, who initiated the idea of the CoFE (Barthalay 2017; de Munck 2017; Taguieff 2020). In the famous speech ‘An Initiative for Europe’, held in 2017, Macron criticized the return of ‘nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism, isolationist sovereignism’ (Macron 2017). Macron called for defending the idea of Europe and building a ‘sovereign, united and democratic Europe’ (2017). In 2019, in the run up to the European parliamentary elections, he then launched the idea of a Conference on the Future of Europe in a letter to European citizens. Macron re-emphasized the idea that member states cannot withstand the historical challenges on their own and called for a ‘European renewal’, in the face of ever stronger nationalisms. This should be grounded in the ‘European model [...], based on the freedom of man and the diversity of opinions and creation’ (Macron 2019).

### 3.3 Federalism<sup>13</sup>

A core dimension of the federal discourse is its deep grounding in the principles of self-rule and shared rule (Fossum 2017; Burgess 2000), themselves grounded in individual freedom, that is, ‘man must not be a mere instrument to be used by others but an autonomous centre of life’, as expressed in the Manifesto of Ventotene. It is this principle of individual freedom that is at the heart of the belief that a division of Europe in nation-states has to be overcome. National sovereignty risks turning into domination, not least due to hegemonic tendencies of stronger states. National sovereign states are further perceived as potentially spreading forms of authoritarianism or ‘accentuated totalitarianism’, as the Manifesto of Ventotene put it. But also the lack of action, incapacity, or ungovernability of nation-states is seen as a core problem.

In order to overcome both the incapacities and the potential negative implications of a Europe dominated by nation-states, the federal narrative approaches Europe as in great need of unification. A unified Europe is the only way of overcoming the negative implications of fragmentation. For federalists, modern, civilized progress can be only achieved through supranational solutions. Federalists sometimes even go one step further, that is, without further unification an existential crisis appears unavoidable. The idea is that the European Union is currently too disoriented, and it needs to be refounded (Balibar 2017). The unification is, however, not to result in a new state, a centralized European ‘superstate’, but rather a collective, integrated effort (Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt 2005). Such a form of supranational cooperation is already highly developed in the form of a ‘quasi-federal system’, which appears as irreversible (Balibar 2017).

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.voltbelgium.org/about-volt>.

<sup>12</sup> Macron’s position is not least ambiguous – and frequently contradictory – due to his emphasis on national identity, patriotism, protectionism, and ‘European sovereignty’.

<sup>13</sup> The core texts used for the analysis are the Ventotene Manifesto (Spinelli and Rossi), Balibar 2017, Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt 2005. Please note that federalism and cosmopolitanism appear to be intertwined, especially in their emphasis on an integrated European institutional infrastructure. However, it is worth noting that the ontology of cosmopolitanism is based on individuals (hence rights and citizenship are prominent), while federalism appears more concerned with common institutional formations. Moreover, the Europeanization of state politics does not necessarily presuppose a transfer of sovereignty to transnational institutions.



Not surprisingly, federalists have shown great interest in the CoFE. In the run up to the CoFE, the Union of European Federalists (UEF) stated that the ‘Conference must [...] be able to translate [citizens’ demands] into a comprehensive proposal for a new Treaty that will overcome the impasses that are still weakening the European Union. The difficult historical and political moment and the support of the majority of citizens must be a stimulus for courageous and forward-looking action’ (emphasis added). In fact, according to the federalists, ‘The concerns of citizens can only be effectively addressed through a genuine European capacity to act: a sovereign Europe, underpinned by democratic accountability’.<sup>14</sup> In March 2021, UEF issued a joint appeal for a Federal Europe, stating that ‘we are eagerly awaiting the start of the Conference on the future of Europe, an event designed to bring together citizens, leading exponents of civil society, NGOs, trade unions, and representatives of national and European institutions, to debate and decide how to go about adapting our institutions in a way that will complete the building of our federal Europe. Their efforts must be underpinned by the clear realisation that the fundamental decisions on common borrowing and taxation cannot indefinitely remain in the hands of national governments alone, but must be made together in an effective, transparent and democratic way’.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.4 Conservatism and right-wing populism<sup>16</sup>

Right-wing conservatism and the right-wing populist discourse are grounded in the principle of national sovereignty, and as a result tend to be the mostly sceptical with regard to international and supranational integration. The entire post-Second World War trend of international integration, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is seen as a chimera, but – paradoxically - also as a threat for national traditions and cultures, as religious dimensions are threatened by the multicultural positions of ‘Euroglobalism’ (Scruton 2019). The argument is that Europe can only exist while recognizing its borders and a European spirit allegedly based on national sovereignty (Becchi 2019). The EU’s legitimacy is grounded in national peoples (Scruton 2019), rather than in individuals or groups of citizens. National sovereignty is what has historically defined the European system of states (Becchi 2019). The European institutions are seen as relatively powerless, while a re-strengthening of national sovereignty is seen as the main solution for facing current challenges (Scruton 2019).

Conservative, right-wing populism criticizes the cosmopolitan view: the ‘false Europe praises itself as the forerunner of a universal community that is neither universal nor a community’ (Paris Statement 2017). The nation-state is understood as a real, authentic entity and as the expression of the political will of peoples (Becchi 2019). The European integration process threatens national power, in that any increase in EU power is diminishing national sovereignty (Scruton 2019). Moreover, it threatens the foundations of the European spirit: Christianity and the Greek-Roman civilization (Becchi 2019). The conservative, right-wing populist project is, however, not a closed one, but seeks a League of Peoples, a Europe of the Peoples, which operates in the interests of the peoples and not the markets (Becchi 2019). In act, the ‘true Europe is a community of nations’ (Paris Statement 2017; emphasis added).

Conservative and right-wing forces have been highly sceptical of the CoFE process from the start. The co-chair of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) in the European Parliament, Raffaele Fitto, defined the CoFE as an ‘initiative that attempts to create a shortcut for pro-European activists by overriding the national representative democracies’. For the ECR, the Conference risked ‘being yet another attempt to push ahead with the federalist agenda, and to impose a centralised vision for Europe, without any real

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.thefederalist.eu/site/index.php/en/documents/2446-towards-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe>.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.federalists.eu/news-uef/view/uef-the-spinellii-group-appeal-our-federal-europe>.

<sup>16</sup> The primary texts used are Becchi 2019, the Paris Statement 2017, Scruton 2019.

confrontation'.<sup>17</sup> For ECR co-chair Ryszard Legutko, there was a 'fear that this process deliberately aims to undermine the nation-state democracies with the opinions of self-appointed leaders and federalist activists'. In their 'Europe's Future' campaign, ECR stated that 'We want our national democracies to work together, cooperating in a constructive partnership to make progress on matters of common concern. But this does not mean we need a centralised Europe that does not respect the rights of our citizens as expressed in their national democratic governments. The EU institutions must respect our sovereign Member States'.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.5 Leftism and left populism<sup>19</sup>

While cosmopolitan discourse is composed of individual human beings, the left-wing 'polity' is composed of political groups struggling for their interests against other groups. The core principle of justification is equality of all people or citizens. In the left-wing view, particularly emphasized in populist versions, the people is a collective entity struggling against a common enemy – e.g. mainstream parties and international elites – 'butlers of the rich instead of messengers of the citizens' (Errejón, in: Errejón and Mouffe 2016: 107). For leftists, 'the chief adversaries are the forces of neo-liberal globalisation' (Mouffe 2013), not Muslims or migrants, as right-wing populism claims. The 'left' in left-wing populism is defined both in economic and in cultural terms, reflecting the experiences of the old and new social movements in the West. In contemporary times, this means that there are different subjects articulating demands, instead of one (i.e. the working class). The legitimacy of left-wing politics is based on the European experience of social democracy and its emphasis on equality and solidarity. While cosmopolitanism is organized around the vision of a clash between the nationalism of the past and a progressive cosmopolitan future, leftism articulates the crisis of representational politics and of the neoliberal nature of the EU project. A clear split between sovereigntist and critical European left-wing forces becomes evident here. The first, exemplified for instance by La France Insoumise or parts of the Labour Party, prioritizes national sovereigntism and in its most radical forms calls for Lexit (Newell 2022). La France Insoumise, in its 2019 political programme, called for a 'retreat from the current European Treaties' and endorsed putting the 'sovereignty of the peoples at the heart of Europe' (France Insoumise 2019: 4-5; 2022). The second, the 'critical Europeanists', criticize the current European status quo, but rather than promoting exit, endorse alternative, radically democratized forms of European integration. As for instance argued in the 2019 programme of Die Linke, the left called for another, 'solidaristic Europe' and claimed that Europe should not be 'left to the Right and the neoliberals' (Die Linke 2019: 59).

For the critical Europeanists, the solution to the current democratic and economic crisis is a radical politicization of the European institutions - making them a site of agonistic politics (while states equally remain sites of political struggle), and a radicalization of democracy in the sense of returning to the root concepts of popular sovereignty and equality. The final product of these struggles is to be a new social contract for the people, implemented in the form of a new vision of European politics that goes beyond the false choice between neoliberal Europe and a dismissal of the entire European project. While the sovereigntist left largely ignored or rejected the CoFE – for La France Insoumise it was a 'masquerade' -, the Europeanist left in part engaged with the CoFE, as an 'opportunity to be used for an in-depth, broadly set-up debate on the future development of Europe, including its Treaties' (Die Linke 2021). In fact, for the European left, the CoFE can be understood as a pre-constituent moment in which the current Treaties are to be re-opened for debate. For most European left forces, the CoFE was understood as an opportunity. One conspicuous exception is the 'movement-party'

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<sup>17</sup> See [https://ecrgroup.eu/article/the\\_ecr\\_group\\_remains\\_highly\\_sceptical\\_towards\\_the\\_conference\\_on\\_the\\_future](https://ecrgroup.eu/article/the_ecr_group_remains_highly_sceptical_towards_the_conference_on_the_future).

<sup>18</sup> See <https://ecrthefuture.eu/>.

<sup>19</sup> For the analysis of this discourse, the works of Mouffe (2013, 2019), and Errejón and Mouffe 2016 were selected.

Democracy in Europe 2025 (DiEM25), a transnational, radical, left populist movement, created by inter alia Yanis Varoufakis in Berlin in 2016, and which presented itself at the 2019 European parliamentary elections. DiEM25 has ignored the COFE almost entirely, even if in 2019 some of its members proposed to seize the momentum of CoFE, to make strong demands on the organization of the CoFE, to endorse a ‘democratic relaunch of the EU’, and to pave the way for a European Constitution.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.6 Participatory democracy<sup>21</sup>

A final discourse is that of participatory democracy. For decades now, the imperative of participation has been considered an integral part of good governance; hence its presence in key documents of the EU (notably the EC’s 2001 White Paper on Governance). Also, the Lisbon Treaty affirms the right of every citizen ‘to participate in the democratic life of the Union’ (Article 10.3). However, there is a lot of criticism on the availability of participatory spaces within the institutional structure of the EU, making the participatory discourse a distinctive way of approaching a democratic EU. In fact, in more radical terms, the key justificatory principle of participatory democracy is self-government or autonomy.

European citizens are understood as active individuals, capable of public choices and collaboration. Strong democracy (Barber 1984) requires robust institutions of civil education and well-designed forums for deliberation and cooperation. In the EU context, dialogue and the opening up to new voices are seen as crucial, while the need to listen to others (*audi alteram partem*) should become a basic norm of European integration (Tully 2007: 74). Critique may stimulate positive dynamics and improve the system as a whole (Youngs 2018). In this, insufficient empowerment of European citizens is the crucial problem of the EU’s current legitimacy malaise (Youngs 2018: 84). The solution proposed is a strong democracy, based on the idea of commonality among citizens (Barber 1984: 133; Youngs 2018). Tully (2007: 72) speaks of bringing new voices into the picture and integrating diverse opinions. Participatory agency is about deliberation, decision and creative consensus (Barber 1984: 126, 219; Young 2018: 88).

A crucial motivation in the participatory discourse is public interest rather than a social contract (Barber 1984: 219). This requires responsible citizens able to look beyond their private interests. In this, it is important to mobilize and activate people in order to create a possibility for critique and to regenerate democracy (Youngs 2018: 87-9). In an ideal world, the common goal should be an active multilevel citizenship (Youngs 2018: 84, 89) based on the idea of *audi alteram partem* (Tully 2007: 74). Participatory discourse creates an image of natural political relationships as based on cooperation and common participatory activity. Barber (1984) speaks about cooperative democracy as ‘thick democracy’, in contrast to ‘thin democracy’, which stands for instrumental, representative, liberal democracy. The ideal of equality among people (Barber 1984: 119) as a natural model of society is challenged by prevailing elitism (Youngs 2018: 85). Youngs argues that ‘(t)oday’s populist surge is in essence about citizens’ desire to push back the boundaries of the prevailing status quo and encourage elites to explore hitherto un contemplated and undefined changes’ (Youngs 2018: 86).

The participatory discourse with an explicit focus on the EU is evident in transnational movements and coalitions such as European Alternatives (a transnational civil society organization) or DiEM25 (also Volt Europe has a significant set of participatory claims). The related civil society coalition Citizens Take over Europe (CTOE) – set up in the run-up to the CoFE - believes the key answer to the infamous EU’s democratic deficit is to radically increase possibilities for active engagement of citizens in EU policy- and decision-making, calling for a European Citizens’ Assembly:

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<sup>20</sup> See <https://internal.diem25.org/sl/vote/207/public>.

<sup>21</sup> The selected core texts within the participatory discourse consist of pieces by Barber (1984), Tully (2007), and Youngs (2018).

The EU's conspicuous democratic deficit builds on the underlying crisis of representative democracy. Far from new, citizens' mistrust towards national and European institutions, as well as towards the political elites, persists throughout the continent. It is urgent to rethink the role of the people in Europe: in times of great uncertainty, especially, citizens' involvement in decision-making becomes paramount to strengthening our democracies. But to overcome mistrust towards the EU and address the socio-economic and environmental challenges ahead, we need more inclusive and innovative instruments of participatory democracy beyond the nation-state (CTOE 2021).

#### **4. Left transnational populism**

The six discourses on European integration identified above are not an exhaustive set but at the same time appear to cover a significant part of the core positions on the European project, as also visible in the debates on the CoFE. Many positions are more closely related to the status quo, few appear to endorse (radical) change. A key division is between (neo-)liberal positions involving (a rather superficial) cosmopolitanism (open borders, universal norms/rule of law) and a strong emphasis on 'growth', on one hand, and conservative and right-wing populist positions endorsing a form of communitarianism (national sovereignty; national culture), on the other. Both appear as largely status quo-oriented (defending existing Treaties and national prerogatives) or even regressive (as in the case of the idea of a return to a 'Europe of the sovereign peoples'). Both positions tend to deny an urgent crisis situation in Europe. In contrast, discursive positions that emphasize a poly-crisis tend to link this to significant change or reform (including in relation to the democratic deficit and crisis, the environmental challenge, the challenge of socio-economic inequality).

In this regard, federalist, cosmopolitan, and participatory democratic positions appear more change and future-oriented, formulating more specific answers to get out of Europe's poly-crisis: a federal union, a rights-based open polity/European citizenship, and a bottom-up, citizen-driven polity respectively. Federal and cosmopolitan positions however risk being perceived as elitist, essentialist, and closer to the institutions and European elites (see Nicolaïdis 2020). In contrast, a third discourse,<sup>22</sup> participatory democracy, appears more of a popular approach, closer to European citizens, by stressing active citizenship.

The transnational left populist discourse is distinctive in its combination of a populist position with a transnational view of the European people(-s) (Moskvina 2022). It is also different in that it seems to be a mixture or composite strategy (Nicolaïdis 2020) that combines inclusive democratic positions on active citizen involvement with distinctive ideas of a deepened European project, grounded in cosmopolitan and federal ideas. As will be highlighted below, the left populist composite strategy seems to combine – maybe not always in a coherent way - more classical idealist positions (federalism, cosmopolitanism), with bottom-up, radical democracy, inclusive solidarity (beyond European citizens), and radical environmentalism.<sup>23</sup>

It has to be recognized that transnational left populism is politically relatively marginal, not least indicated by a lack of success in the 2019 EP elections. Here, we attempt to illustrate the composite nature of transnational left populism, in its continuation of much of the traditional critique of the left on European

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<sup>22</sup> The discursive analysis (utilizing the software Nvivo) was based on gathered textual materials and more than 30 interviews with Czech, German, Italian, and transnational DiEM25 and European Alternatives activists (held in 2019-2020).

<sup>23</sup> Some have described transnational left populism as a form of 'revolutionary reformism' or 'peaceful radicalism' (see Downes 2023: 363), which is not necessarily anti-systemic, but does indicate a radically different European project.

integration (in particular, regarding neoliberalism and the ‘social question’, see Kessel and Fagan 2022), while also developing an explicit pro-Europeanist populist position (in the sense of criticizing establishment elites and status quo institutions) in combination with cosmopolitan and federalist positions.

#### 4.1 Left critique on neoliberalism

To some extent the left-populist project of DiEM25 follows the more traditional social and democratic critique of the (radical) left. A core, traditional leftist dimension of the transnational left populist discourse consists in the acknowledgement of a severe socio-economic crisis and the endorsement of a profound critique of neoliberalism (Šrám 2022). The latter critique is essentially three-fold. First, a critique of core neoliberal *principles* focuses predominantly on the principle of equality (and the factually rapid increase in inequality), technocratic-bureaucratic governance, and the limits of the mantra of endless growth. The critique of endless growth is linked to environmental change, for which mainly large companies and/or the richest one percent are seen as responsible: ‘[i]nequality is also linked to the changing climate in a more direct way. The richest 10 percent of people are responsible for 49 percent of all lifestyle consumption emissions [...]. 100 companies are responsible for 71 percent of all global emissions’ (DiEM25 2019). Second, the *moral* basis of the anti-neoliberal critique utilizes motives of irresponsibility, moral hazard, and selfishness, combined with a disregard for the disadvantaged or vulnerable European citizens. Third, left populists articulate a critique of the *institutionalization* of the neoliberal tenets in the European institutions and in the EU’s post-crisis development. It concerns the idea that neoliberal values are deeply entrenched within the European integration project: ‘[t]his is a crisis by design. The policy of austerity, which severely constrains the public sector's spending capacity, has been built into European treaties and reinforced in subsequent agreement’ (DiEM25 2019). This is seen as problematic as the political dynamics within the EU are understood as driven by the exploitation of poor countries by rich ones (interpreted along the North - South, West - East axis). Finally, the post-crisis development of neoliberal policies is criticized for its authoritarian steps vis-a-vis the post-crisis reconstruction: ‘[i]n response to the inevitable failure of Europe's cartelised social economy to rebound from the post-2008 Great Recession, the EU's institutions that caused this failure have been resorting to escalating authoritarianism. The more they asphyxiate democracy, the less legitimate their political authority becomes, the stronger the forces of economic recession, and the greater their need for further authoritarianism’ (DiEM25 2016). DiEM25 posits that neoliberalism is essentially *anti-democratic*.

#### 4.2 The democratic critique and participatory democracy

The critical Europeanists’ position<sup>24</sup> on neoliberalism is aligned with a broader, bottom-up and popular/left-populist approach. Here, left-populism relates to the participatory democracy discourse. The transnational left populist position emphasizes the basic principles of liberal democracy but equally follows a critical, radical-democratic approach by, for instance, invoking constituent politics as their main project. As one DiEM25 member argued, ‘[b]y making the member-states the Masters of the Treaties, the people are explicitly cut out from the *pouvoir* constituent, having only an indirect influence over the Treaties’ content’ (Hufton 2017). The most prominent critique is that the EU consists of a technocratically driven, market-fundamentalist project, where ‘all decisions are made beyond the sight and control of citizens, and our enslavement to our economic conditions becomes an immutable fact of life’ (Hufton 2017). As DiEM25 states in its statement European Constituent Assembly, the ‘EU is a complex institutional framework which remains largely obscure for the

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<sup>24</sup> In its 2024 manifesto, DiEM25 labels itself ‘radical Europeanists’ (DiEM25 2024).

people of Europe and where technocrats take decisions behind closed doors to serve the national elites and corporate interests’ (DiEM25 2017). The EU Treaties that provide the basis for European integration ‘give a platform for politics to take place above citizen-led democratic politics and they justify the lack of democratic control over the processes and institutions of the union’ (Hufton 2017).

The bottom-up, participatory-democratic stance of DiEM25 was upfront in its ‘Strategy for Transnational Democracy’:

We must renounce the failed logic that assigns to national governments primacy of European policy. It is time to *give back to citizens their constituent power*, to put them at the center of the new democratization process. In order to do it, we have to act using any possible space and opportunity, inside and outside the existing framework of EU treaties. Our main task will be to give Europeans the feeling that they exist as a transnational power able to decisively change the current system (DiEM25 2017; emphasis added).

In DiEM25’s 2022 *Manifesto for democratizing Europe*, it articulates its ‘political vision’:

We recognise that Europeans have given up on their politicians - and they are right! To empower the people of Europe we envisage *new layers of deliberative democracy* (e.g. democratic deliberation councils comprising randomly selected residents) between the voters and elected representatives (e.g. parliament, local and national governments). At a pan-european level, DiEM25 is committed to a series of *constitutional people’s assemblies* – along the same principle of democratic deliberation councils – that will hammer out a *democratic constitution of a European Republic* (DiEM25 2022; emphasis added).<sup>25</sup>

### 4.3 Leftwing populism and cosmopolitanism

The left transnational populist position displays cosmopolitan traits in stressing a pan-European project, and against the return of nationalism and sovereignty. Indeed, for Koch, DiEM25 is a case of ‘cosmopolitan populism’, which stresses ‘popular integration beyond the nation state against corrupted elites’ (Koch 2020: 19). Also Agustín sees DiEM25 as a cosmopolitan movement, in strong contrast to the sovereignist, nationalist positions of various leftwing populist actors (Agustín 2020: 112-3). And as Varoufakis, the leader of DiEM25, has argued: ‘We developed a cosmopolitan narrative of how ‘another’ Europe, ‘another’ world is possible’.<sup>26</sup> In its founding manifesto, DiEM25 stated:

The European Union was an exceptional achievement, bringing together in peace European peoples speaking different languages, submersed in different cultures, proving that it was possible to create a shared framework of human rights across a continent that was, not long ago, home to murderous chauvinism, racism and barbarity. The European Union could have been the proverbial Beacon on the Hill, showing the world how peace and solidarity may be snatched from the jaws of centuries-long conflict and bigotry.

Alas, today, a common bureaucracy and a common currency divide European peoples that were beginning to unite despite our different languages and cultures. A confederacy of myopic politicians, economically naïve officials and financially incompetent ‘experts’ submit slavishly to the edicts of financial and industrial

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<sup>25</sup> Also in its manifesto for the 2024 European elections, DiEM25 stresses participatory and deliberative instruments, such as a permanent European Citizens’ Assembly (DiEM25 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Varoufakis acknowledges though that the cosmopolitan message is too complex, losing out against right-wing populist simplicity: ‘we need to pitch progressive simplicity versus regressive oversimplification’, see <https://diem25.org/a-painful-lesson-from-brexit-why-diem25-needs-a-simpler-message/>.

conglomerates, alienating Europeans and stirring up a dangerous anti-European backlash. Proud peoples are being turned against each other. Nationalism, extremism and racism are being re-awakened (DiEM 2016).

Among the activists we interviewed, the justification of the EU as a peace and transnational project was prominent, in particular amongst activists that came from core EU countries such as Germany or France. A German activist emphasized: ‘The EU ... started as ... a peace project for Europe, as a decision: we as Europe don’t want to fight each other anymore, we want to stand together’. The left transnational populist position endorses further integration of the EU, is based on the empowerment of transnational institutions (in particular the European Parliament), and on the reinforcement of human rights. Activists expressed the priority of international and EU law vividly against Polish and Hungarian political leaders, who are the reason Europeans ‘might need to revise human rights’ on the continent. Integration makes the EU stronger, for instance to withstand global challenges such as the climate crisis. According to some activists, institutional and communicative integration of the EU is the first step towards global cosmopolitan governance: ‘... we need to have global governance on this planet. We need to move towards this action. And the EU is [a step] ... towards ... global democratic governance of some sort’. DiEM25’s cosmopolitanism is further reflected in specific political demands such as European citizenship (European New Deal) or in the demands of the equality of rights (including political rights) for refugees and migrants.

#### **4.4 Transnational politics and federal claims**

Even if left populism is frequently understood as a threat to European integration (see Venezelos/Stavrakakis 2020), ‘critical Europeanism’ shows significant affinity with federalist understandings of European integration. Such federalist ideas include a clear appreciation of supra-nationalist politics and the need to go beyond mere intergovernmental integration. The classical thrust in federalism against ‘statist pathologies’ (Nicolaidis 2020: 1311) is reflected here. A significant idea is that a European sovereignty should develop in parallel to national sovereignties. As forcefully stated by one DiEM25 activist, ‘what DiEM25’s initiative has been up until some time ago, but I think it will continue to be, is to break with this tradition [intergovernmentalism], not because the States are not important, or we should necessarily act against the States, but because the States alone, if the constituent power continues to be given just to them, they are actors that tend to one thing, their own preservation’.

Its federal dimension makes the transnational left-populist movement importantly close to the European federalist movement, also in its contemporary form. Lorenzo Marsili, one of the founders of DiEM25, claimed that in Europe, the ‘perception that movements like DiEM25... are actually an enemy is a completely fallacious perspective’. According to Marsili, ‘if the idea of pro-Europeanism is reduced to the establishment of pro-Europeanism for the Junckers and Macrons, that is a recipe for disaster. That is a recipe of maintaining maybe one third of the population on board and losing control of their main two thirds’. A pro-European integration stance is best served not by an establishment position, but by more radically Europeanist visions: ‘I think pro-European forces need radical pan-European or radical Europeanist political parties and maybe they should really understand that these are not their enemies’. As also another activist argues, ‘the idea of a transnational movement that from the start aimed at fighting for a Constituent Assembly, was exactly in line with Spinelli’s dream, Ventotene’s dream. Trying to take that mission seriously, because maybe the European Federalist Movement has abandoned the revolutionary spirit that [it] used to have with Spinelli’.

An essential dimension of the transnational left movement is hence an emphasis on the necessity of real or authentic forms of transnational or post-national politics, meaning a politics that is not reducible to national political actors and national interests. Rather, it consists in a politics which endorses a European common good, rather than the aggregation of various national interests. The main obstacle for European integration,

according to an activist, is ‘precisely the intergovernmental model: the fact that these 27 countries cannot act together and cannot legislate in the interest of the majority of Europeans, and for that we need federalism’. This means that also in order to strengthen local political potential, federalism is needed to create the right framework: ‘unless you have a common European approach to migration, there is only so much that you can enable an individual community or a city to autonomously decide in terms of migration management... greater federalism within the EU is precisely what creates a significant meaningful space for sub-government and autonomy at the lower level of political organization’.

According to a DiEM-25 activist, there is a revolutionary dimension to this in contemporary Europe: ‘A revolutionary rupture which, from our point of view, should be done through peaceful means, through mass mobilization, self-mobilization by citizens who care deeply about this project and need to convince other citizens who maybe are disillusioned. What could the European Union look like in a federal form – the power that a shared welfare coming from this could mean for the benefit of the European citizen, for the benefit of the world! It is also a pacifying power, the gentle force that Europe could have in the international equilibrium. Which means basically acting beyond frontiers together with other citizens’.

## 5. Conclusions

The Conference on the Future of Europe – as the most recent instance of collective brainstorming on the future of the EU - was intended to ‘build a better future by living up to the most enduring promises of the past. Promises of peace and prosperity, fairness and progress; of a Europe that is social and sustainable, that is caring and daring’. According to Von der Leyen, the Conference had produced a ‘vision of a Europe that pools its strengths and capacities and diversity to tackle the biggest challenges – from climate change or nature loss, to pandemics or security in our region’ (Von der Leyen 2022). In reality, very little has come out of the CoFE, and the EU institutions, including the Commission, seem to continue ‘business as usual’ (for instance, by claiming that a large majority of the citizens’ recommendations are already covered by Commission policies). Critical Europeanists of DiEM25, in fact, avoided CoFE in that they claimed the ‘future of Europe...[is] being ridiculed by the EU’s so-called “Conference on the Future of Europe”’.<sup>27</sup>

The non-participation of critical European forces in events such as CoFE indicates one dimension of the lack of influence of critical Europeanist ideas. More in general, in fact, it needs to be acknowledged that a critical, progressive Europeanist project faces several major obstacles. The European elections of June 2024 have once again shown the obstacles that prevent critical Europeanists to gain a stronger foothold in the institutions. One of such obstacles may be precisely the composite and pluralist nature of its discourse. Downes et al. suggest (without however providing real substantiation), there may be a disadvantage in the critical Europeanist discourse in terms of its abstractness and complexity (in particular in contrast to the right-wing populist, simplified sovereignist message) (2023: 370-1). This, in fact, seems acknowledged by DiEM25 itself: ‘We developed a cosmopolitan narrative of how ‘another’ Europe, ‘another’ world is possible. But, unforgivably, we missed the most important thing about all this: that those on the bottom of the social heap are consumed by Deep Discontent that leaves them in no mood for complexity – they have no time for sophisticated, complicated analyses, or for lofty political agendas’.<sup>28</sup>

The deeper grounds may in fact be that the EU’s greatest obstacle – the return of the national(-ist) imaginary - proves to be much more profoundly shaping collective imagination than was thought some 20 years ago. In fact, a core challenge for the EU is currently the project of an alternative Europe in the form of a ‘Europe of

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<sup>27</sup> See <https://diem25.org/vote-now-our-stance-the-israel-palestine-question-and-our-policy-for-europes-2020s/>.

<sup>28</sup> See <https://diem25.org/a-painful-lesson-from-brexit-why-diem25-needs-a-simpler-message/>.



the peoples' or 'Europe of the nations', endorsed by right-wing populist parties that have gained further strength in the 2024 European elections. The simplifying right-wing discourse that endorses national sovereignty as a solution for any major problem has great mainstreaming potential. In contrast, post-national or European, transnational ideals of political community are not broadly endorsed ideas. Regarding transnational left populism, and as indeed recent studies of DiEM25 and other critical Europeanists have borne out (see Císař and Weisskircher 2021; Moskvina 2022; Scharenberg 2021), the construction of a European commonality and post-national identity, and in more tangible and mobilizational terms, a multi-level, pan-European political organization and transversal agency, connecting various critical, pro-European actors (Scharenberg 2021), prove to be vast challenges in the construction of the critical Europeanist project. It may in fact be time that affinities between transnational left populism and other (federal, cosmopolitan, democratic) projects are recognized and turned into a mobilizational strength.

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## Annex 1 – Discourse matrix Right-wing populism

Discourse				
Type of claim	<b>Ontology</b> <i>Basic entities whose existence is recognized or constructed</i>	<b>Agency</b> <i>Degrees of agency attached to entities</i>	<b>Motivations</b> <i>Motivations of agents to act</i>	<b>Natural</b> <i>Conceptions of natural and unnatural political relationships</i>
<i>Definitive (meaning)</i>	The rights of individuals have multiplied, as a	The sovereigntists do not hate Europe,	Euro-globalism really needs this: to cancel the	We have forgotten that states themselves are not

	<p>result of international universal declarations of principles, but often without any effective mechanism of protection (Becchi 18).  <b>[rights as a chimera]</b></p> <p>One has to realize that without borders, without traditions and peoples, Europe simply does not exist (Becchi 21).  <b>[Europe of the peoples]</b></p> <p>The constitutional treaties and the transnational courts of the European Union have made a point of granting no favours to the Christian faith, and the spirit of multiculturalism has ensured that national cultures receive no subsidies either from national governments or from the European Union itself. A cult of the minority has been imposed from above (Scruton).  <b>[multiculturalism undermines national culture]</b></p>	<p>actually, thanks to them, Europe can re-emerge in a new form with the authentic European spirit (21).  <b>[sovereignists will construct a true Europe]</b></p> <p>Of course, we should not be deluded, the European Parliament can do very little in this moment, its powers are extremely limited, and to “change the Treaties” is an endeavour that may seem impossible (Becchi 24)  <b>[limited powers EP]</b></p> <p>It is the sovereignists that can recreate Europe, saving its plural identity, its multiple national-populist traditions (Becchi).  <b>[new, populist Europe]</b></p> <p>A populist is a politician who appeals too directly to traditional and rooted voters and to sentiments of national belonging – something that has become not a crime exactly, but the thing against which the elite of Europe is in permanent opposition (Scruton).  <b>[Populism represents rooted people]</b></p>	<p>peoples and to substitute them with singular individuals, who have been rendered abstract from any concrete characteristic, making them all the same... (Becchi 19-20).  <b>[EU cancels cultures/individuals]</b></p> <p>national sentiment for most ordinary Europeans is the only motive that would justify sacrifice in the public cause (Scruton)  <b>[national sentiment as justifying sacrifice]</b></p> <p>The patrons of the false Europe are bewitched by superstitions of inevitable progress. (Paris Statement)  <b>[superstition of progress]</b></p>	<p>abstract entities, ma concrete expressions, existential, of the political will of specific peoples (Becchi 18).          The nation states are not equally stable, equally democratic, equally free or equally obedient to the rule of law. But they are all that we have (Scruton).  <b>[states are natural]</b></p> <p>Home is a place where things are familiar, and where we are recognized, however far we have wandered. This is the real Europe, our precious and irreplaceable civilization. Europe is our home. (Paris Statement).  <b>[Europe as home]</b></p> <p>Conservatism starts from a sentiment that all mature people can readily share – the sentiment that good things are easily destroyed but not easily created (Scruton)  <b>[Culture easily destroyed]</b></p>
<p><i>Designative (questions of fact)</i></p>	<p>The European political order, from the mid-17th century onwards, has been constructed on the basis of a “system of states”, that is, as an order based on the reciprocal recognition of national states... (Becchi 16).  <b>[State order]</b></p>	<p>In the 20th century, other actors have come up, next to the state: individuals, to whom have progressively been attributed, on the international level, rights that they could use independently</p>	<p>The true Europe is at risk because of the suffocating grip that the false Europe has over our imaginations. Our nations and shared culture are being hollowed out by illusions and self-deceptions about what</p>	<p>That which makes a people a people is the culture which it expresses, the values which it recognizes, the forms of living together that it wants to establish (Becchi 10).  <b>[Peoples’ essence]</b></p>

	<p>The imperial project is entering into conflict with the only source of sentiment on which it could conceivably draw for its legitimacy (Scruton) <b>[EU vs national legitimacy]</b></p> <p>the half century of peace and prosperity has fed upon the European cultural inheritance without renewing it (Scruton). <b>[Erosion European culture]</b></p>	<p>from the state of which they are a part and if necessary, also against it (Becchi 16). <b>[individuals as rights-bearers, against the state]</b></p> <p>Each increase in (EU) central power has had to be matched by a diminution in national power (Scruton) <b>[diminishment national power]</b></p> <p>Only one thing stands opposed to this result and that is the national sentiments of the European people. (Scruton) <b>[people as opposition to Europe]</b></p>	<p>Europe is and should be. We pledge to resist this threat to our future. We will defend, sustain and champion the real Europe, the Europe to which we all in truth belong. We must defend the real Europe. (Paris Statement) <b>[Defend real Europe]</b></p>	<p>We are always also who have an identity, a culture, a series of beliefs and specific values and who live expressing these values within the communities of which we are a part (Becchi 20). <b>[communitarian being]</b></p> <p>A political community is not a business partnership or a contractual deal. It is a historical settlement bound by loyalty and sense of belonging of a kind that finds its highest expression in a national culture (Scruton) <b>[Political community as natural]</b></p>
<p><i>Evaluative (worth)</i></p>	<p>Today, we do not need <i>more</i> Europe: we are witnessing, to the contrary, continuous claims for sovereignty by the states, which show the failure of Bruxelles' politics and political economy (Becchi 25). <b>[failure supranational Europe]</b></p> <p>European civilisation depends far more on national solidarity than on the transnational institutions that have emerged from the original plan (Scruton) <b>[European integration based on national solidarity]</b></p> <p>Europe, in all its richness and greatness, is threatened by a false understanding of itself. This false Europe imagines itself as a fulfilment of our civilization, but in truth it will confiscate our home. It appeals to</p>	<p>The Europe of the future will be a half-breed: this ideology, the false consciousness of financial elites, is going to finalize the destruction of national European states and will end with the disintegration also of the foundations of the European spirit: christianity and the greek-roman civilization (Becchi 21). <b>[EU destroys nations]</b></p> <p>Politicians often try to press these associations into alien moulds, making them into instruments for external purposes that may be in conflict with their inner character. (Scruton) <b>[Politics is inauthentic]</b></p>	<p>The political process in Europe has therefore acquired a direction. It is not a direction that the people of Europe have chosen. (Scruton) <b>[lack of citizens' choice]</b></p> <p>In the past, Europeans fought to make our political systems more open to popular participation, and we are justly proud of this history. Even as they did so, sometimes in open rebellion, they warmly affirmed that, despite their injustices and failures, the traditions of the peoples of this continent are ours. Such dedication to reform makes Europe a place that seeks ever-greater justice. This spirit of progress is born out of our love for and loyalty to our homelands. Solidarity and civic loyalty encourage active participation.</p>	<p>The idea of a simple return to national states, closed within themselves in a nationalistic sense, is an old idea of sovereigntism which is to be rejected (Becchi 26). <b>[closed nationalism is not natural]</b></p> <p>The process is moving always towards centralisation, top-down control, dictatorship by unelected bureaucrats and judges . . . and constitutional treaties framed without any input whatsoever from the people. In short, the process is moving always towards imperial government. (Scruton) <b>[centralisation]</b> <b>[lack of people's input]</b> <b>[EU is imperialism]</b></p> <p>politics presupposes a shared identity, a definition of who is included that enables each of us to adopt the</p>

	<p>exaggerations and distortions of Europe's authentic virtues while remaining blind to its own vices. (Paris Statement).  <b>[Europe as distorted]</b></p>		<p><b>[democracy results from loyalty]</b></p>	<p>decisions made in our name (Scruton).  <b>[Collective identity as natural]</b></p> <p>The true Europe is a community of nations. We have our own languages, traditions and borders. Yet we have always recognized a kinship with one another, even when we have been at odds—or at war. This unity-in-diversity seems natural to us. (Paris Statement)  <b>[Europe of nations as natural]</b></p>
<p><i>Advocative (ought to be)</i></p>	<p>Sovereignism wants to recuperate the margins of sovereignty vis-a-vis the European Union which has become a “business committee” of global economic and financial lobbies (Becchi 16).  <b>[EU is committee of business lobbies]</b></p> <p>A new sovereignism..., which, in its essence, is open to federalism and to autonomies (Becchi 23).  <b>[Interdependent sovereignty]</b></p>	<p>to think up a new idea of Europe, of a Europe of the peoples against the current European Union of elites and of the financial hierarchies (Becchi 9)  <b>[Europe of the Peoples]</b></p> <p>There is a need for an alliance, of a League of peoples which unites in a Sovereignist International all the free movements want to defend the interests of the peoples and not of the markets in Europe (Becchi 25).  <b>[populist alliance]</b></p> <p>A Europe of the peoples against the current EU of the elites and of the financial oligarchies (Becchi 9)  <b>[Elitism]</b></p>	<p>My idea has always been to oppose “globalism”, in other words the ideology which is at the basis of current European politics, a new sovereignty of states, which could safeguard, at the same time, the defence of identity and of the particularities of singular peoples, and the necessity to construct a new “confederal” Europe based on a free agreement between these peoples (Becchi 8).  <b>[national sovereignty]</b></p> <p>Why should we not bring a gust of populist wind into the only place in the EU where there is a minimum of democracy (the EP) (Becchi 24).  <b>[limited democracy EU/democratization]</b></p>	<p>If we want to reconstruct a new idea of Europe, we have to therefore depart from the peoples that make up Europe (Becchi 21).  <b>[peoples are natural basis]</b></p> <p>we ask all Europeans to join us in rejecting the utopian fantasy of a multicultural world without borders. We rightly love our homelands, and we seek to hand on to our children every noble thing that we have ourselves received as our patrimony. (Paris Statement)  <b>[reject multiculturalism]</b></p>