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OF HUMANITIES  
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# A Democratic European Union: What does it mean?

A discourse analysis of two debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe  
in the European Parliament

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Master of Arts in European Studies

Master's Thesis, 30 ECTS

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Submitted: August 2021

Number of words: 19,274

## **Abstract**

The question of the European Union's (EU) democratic legitimacy has been a crucial issue at all stages of the European integration process. With crises of economic, social and democratic nature, trust in the EU institutions is questioned by citizens, providing a vacuum between expectations and results and a 'democratic deficit'. This context has urged European politicians to propose solutions to the EU's democracy problem.

This dissertation aims to explore the role of language in the construction of a democratic European Union. To do so, two parliamentary debates on the EU's latest democracy exercise will be analysed, i.e., the debates of the 15 January 2020 and 17 June 2020 Conference on the Future of Europe. In this analysis, we will look at the different ways in which Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) talk about the European project and their interpretations of what constitutes a democratic European Union today.

Considering the humanistic tradition, this study will analyse the language use of MEPs and is built on a social constructivist and interpretivist premise, using discourse theory, and conducting a linguistic analysis based on the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This study is interested in analysing how human agents in possession of social power interact, produce discourses and shape the commonly understood meaning of the world.

As a result of the discourse analysis conducted on the selected data, three discourses of a democratic European Union have been identified: a European Union of Sovereign Nations, a Citizen's European Union and a European Union as an International Actor. In terms of the legitimation strategies used for the arguments, the three discourses can be characterized differently, having different potential implications on the construction of a European identity. The results of the paper provide an important entry point to the discussion on a democratic European Union and the future of European integration.

## **Preface**

Having been a Schuman Trainee at the European Parliament's Directorate-General for Communications, Visits and Seminars Unit between October 2020 and March 2021, I got inspired by the different ways in which we talk about the EU. Through working on several projects, the overall aim of communication was to showcase the European Parliament (EP) as the "human face" of the EU, embodying democracy. Being involved with the daily work of the EP's public administration for five months provided me with the opportunity to closely follow how communication materials and narratives brought to life key policy proposals and initiatives, such as the European Democracy Action Plan or the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027. Each of these narratives conveyed the democratic function of the EP as an intermediary between citizens' will and the positions their representatives take during parliamentary debates. While I was closely following these debates and had several interactions with MEPs, in my eyes, the EP started to shape up as a dynamic, colourful and diverse arena for competing ideas and ideologies with the common assumption of its members that there is a need for a stronger democracy in the EU which better serves the interests of European citizens and provides justification of its decisions to the public. For this reason, elected MEPs fulfil an essential democratic function in representative democracies, highlighting the weight and importance of their contributions to political debates, inspiring my choice to study the EP.

I particularly like to express my gratitude to all of those who supported me on my way to making this dissertation possible. First, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Kristian Steiner, for his support and guidance through all the stages of the work. I would also like to thank my previous co-workers in the European Parliament who encouraged my passion about the topic at the very beginning, to Stanislav for the language cosmetics and to François, who supported me through the ups and downs of the writing process.

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*Brussels, 16 August 2021*

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## List of abbreviations

Conference	Conference on the Future of Europe
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
DI	Discursive institutionalism
ID	Identity & Democracy Group
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
Greens	The Greens/EFA
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NA	Non-attached Members
Renew	Renew Europe
S&D	Socialists & Democrats

## 1. Introduction

In 2019, European Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen pledged to deliver ‘A New Push for European Democracy’ in her political guidelines, which she presented to the European Parliament as a candidate for her current role.<sup>1</sup> Under this priority, she promised to increase the decision-making power of the EP, the direct representation of electorates and to give a stronger role to European citizens in decision-making. Within this pledge, she also committed to holding a Conference on the Future of Europe, “for all Europeans to debate a shared vision of what we want our Union to be”.<sup>2</sup>

Her commitments and several other European politicians ringing the bell for a reform of EU democracy suggests that there may be a deficiency regarding how democracy is currently functioning, implicitly questioning the purpose and the future of European integration and pointing towards the existence of a democratic deficit in the EU. Such an understanding is based on the widely accepted assumption that the EU is an elite-driven project without the voice of the governed being considered.<sup>3</sup> The EU is a representative democracy as stated in the Treaties of the European Union; the role and powers of the European Parliament have always been crucial in ensuring democratic legitimacy, referring to the degree of trust in the European integration process.<sup>4</sup> Hence, studying the views and understanding of parliamentarians of EU democracy becomes highly relevant.

Based on the diverse environment of the European Parliament’s current 9<sup>th</sup> legislature, consisting of 751 Members with twenty-seven nationalities, from 190 national political parties and part of seven political groups, the underlying assumption of this thesis is that the ambiguity of ideological perceptions of what the EU means for them as a political construct will result in MEPs suggesting different solutions to the commonly accepted democracy problem of the EU.

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula von der Leyen, “A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe,” accessed August 15, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the inaugural event of the Conference on the Future of Europe” accessed August 11, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_21\\_2381](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_2381)

<sup>3</sup> Stijn Smismans, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union,” in *European Union Politics*, eds. Michelle Cini Michelle & Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th Edition, 2019), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) Article 10 (1), Official Journal of the European Union, 01/03/2020, [http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu\\_2016/oj](http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/oj), (accessed August 11, 2021)

The philosophical understanding of what the EU means for different MEPs, for example, whether it is understood as intergovernmental bargaining of member states or as a union of partially self-governing units, presupposes how policymaking is done and which actors are involved in it, a concept called ‘European governance’. Different modes of European governance highlight the involvement of different actors at different stages and in different modes in this process, resulting in various models of policymaking, which also address and conceptualise democracy and legitimacy differently.<sup>5</sup> These views on governance, democracy and legitimacy, then, will define what a democratic European Union would mean, implying a future trajectory for the European integration process.

Therefore, we assume that different justifications of solutions to the EU’s democracy problem by MEPs during parliamentary debates will suggest a struggle over defining the purpose of the European project in the current reality of the European Union. In this reality, its *raison d’être* is threatened by the various changes affecting the world as well as declining public support. Moreover, these presumptions will also point to the possible options for European integration in the future. The work of Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough, *Discourse in Late Modernity*, refers to this struggle as a “‘misinterpretation’, that is a mismatch between reality and the view people have of this reality that functions ideologically” where the job of the researcher is discovering those.<sup>6</sup>

Based on these assumptions, the EU’s democracy crisis provides the background of this thesis. The topic of the dissertation is timely, as the latest democracy exercise, the Conference on the Future of Europe opens new space to consider long-existing questions, such as the EU’s democracy and legitimacy problem, the definition and purpose of the European project, the lack of a common vision for the future of the EU, and the growing gap between European citizens and the EU institutions. In this context, this analysis will focus on one EU institution, the European Parliament, and the discussions of its representatives – the MEPs. The objective of this thesis is to answer the questions of how MEPs define the European project through their parliamentary debates and what these mean for EU democracy and the future of the European

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<sup>5</sup> Smismans, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union,” 132-33.

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Jørgensen & Louise J. Phillips, eds., *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications LTD, 2002), chap. 1, 15, <https://methods-sagepub-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/book/discourse-analysis-as-theory-and-method/n1.xml>.

Union. This will be done by conducting a discourse analysis of a carefully selected corpus of 51 speeches made by 33 MEPs during two parliamentary debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe throughout 2020.

## 1.1. Structure

This thesis has been structured as follows:

- **Chapter 1** provides an introduction to the topic and structure of this thesis, including an overview of the structure of the report (Section 1.1), an overview of the aims, objectives and research questions underpinning this study (Section 1.2), and an overview of the research design, key research challenges and limitations (Section 1.3).
- **Chapter 2** presents a literature review and background to the study. More specifically, this chapter will review the roots of the EU's democratic legitimacy crisis (Section 2.1), the importance of public communication, including parliamentary debates for democratic accountability and as the object of this study (Section 2.2) and a summary of previous research in the field of discourse analysis and European studies (Section 2.3).
- **Chapter 3** forms the theoretical and methodological framework of the study by presenting the data sources (Section 3.1), a theoretical discussion (Section 3.2) and the research methodology and analytical steps (Section 3.3); it also discusses the validity and reliability of the study and its data (Section 3.4).
- **Chapter 4** starts with the description of the debates and presents the findings and research results along with an analytical discussion based on the theory and methodology outlined in the previous section, including the answers to the initially posed research questions and objectives.
- **Chapter 5** presents the conclusions and summarizes the answer to the research questions as well as their implications for future research and outside academia.

## 1.2. Research questions

As mentioned above, this thesis seeks to **analyse the discourses of Members of the European Parliament and their interpretations of what constitutes a democratic European Union.** This is important because the EU's democracy problem or democratic deficit stems from "the idea that the transfer of policy-making power from the national level to the EU has not been accompanied by sufficient democratic control at the European level", making the European



Parliament responsible for ensuring democratic accountability.<sup>7</sup> Even though the powers of the European Parliament have been significantly increased since 1979 when direct elections were introduced, the problem of democracy remains, suggesting the need to have a different look at the problem. There is a vast number of studies about what the EU means and how it could become more democratic and better attached to its citizens through a sense of common belonging, yet its meaning remains uncaptured by political and social science. Talking about democracy and the EU seems evident, but there is much more to it than to serve as a simple ‘mirror of nature’. Among “much effort to name this unknown beast”, that of the European Union, MEPs do not simply **talk** about the European Union, but through the simple act of talking, they also **construct** it.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, looking for the different meanings of a simple word as ‘democracy’ could solve the puzzle part of the EU’s democracy problem.

In order to answer this overarching research question, the following specific research questions will be examined:

1. ***How** do Members of the European Parliament define the European project in light of the EU’s alleged ‘democratic deficit’ problem?*

Through this first research question, we will seek to gain a better understanding of the MEPs’ definition, proposed causes and solutions to the EU’s alleged democratic deficit problem, more specifically by analysing:

1. *How MEPs define the EU’s democracy problem*
2. *How MEPs define the underlying causes of the EU’s democracy problem*
3. *The solutions MEPs suggest increasing democracy in the EU and their implications for European integration*

The above questions have been inspired by Robert M. Entman’s framework. According to Entman, in constructionist research, the reasoning is connected to defining a problem,

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<sup>7</sup> Smismans, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union,” 128.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Diez, “Speaking ‘Europe’: The Politics of Integration Discourse,” in *The Social Construction of Europe*, eds. Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen & Antje Wiener A. (SAGE Publications, 2001), 85, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed August 12, 2021.

interpreting its causes, introducing moral judgments, and recommending possible solutions.<sup>9</sup> The first question will aim to *diagnose* how Members define and describe the need for strengthened democracy and legitimacy in the EU. The second question will seek to understand better how Members *evaluate* the underlying reasons of the democracy problem of the EU and introduce a certain moral judgement, attributing the causes to certain events, factors, or subjects. Finally, the third question will seek to discover the suggested institutional, political, structural, social, or economic *solutions* to make the European project more democratic. This last element will also be likely to point towards a future vision of European (dis)integration. These questions will help to develop an understanding of the competing and conflictual discourses that take place in the European Parliament about the European project as a democratic and legitimate construction, as well as point towards political change as regards the future of European integration.

2. ***How*** do discourses of the Members of the European Parliament on the European project potentially impact the formation of European identity?

The second research question will seek to examine the potential impact of MEPs' discourses throughout the two parliamentary debates analysed about the Conference on the Future of Europe. This will be done by analysing how words and sentences that have been uttered can potentially carry meaning and form, change or question social reality. In other words, this will be done to determine whether the strategic use of different discourses on the current state of the European Union could constitute a certain type of European identity.

The focus on political and social change possibilities is reflected in the critical approach that the research employs. Through analysing these research questions, the purpose is not only to take stock of existing legitimacy discourses of the EU but also to look at it from a problem-driven perspective, reflecting upon the critique that the European Union is an elite-driven construction.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communications* 43, no. 4 (1993) 52.

A critical approach to the current state of European democracy will allow the research to investigate possible solutions available to the EU's democratic legitimacy problem.

### **1.3. Research design and limitations**

To answer the research questions described above, the dissertation is based on a discourse analytical approach, which is going to be used as both an analytical technique and applied as a general theory of politics from a social constructivist perspective. For this reason, the theoretical assumptions and methodological choices made cannot be separated from each other, resulting in these two sections being merged in one chapter.

Therefore, as part of the research design addressing the research questions, the following methodology will be used:

- **Data selection:** The selection of the empirical data has been guided by the established time frame, namely limiting the analysed data to European Parliament currently in office, whose members were elected in 2019. Moreover, the search has been limited to debates referring to both European democracy and the future of the European Union. The two debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe have been selected after an initial search on the European Parliament's website. After the selection criteria and the researcher's own delimitations have been applied, the analysis includes 51 speeches made by 33 Members of the European Parliament in two parliamentary debates that took place on 15 January and 17 June 2020.
- **Theoretical framework:** The concrete discourse theory applied in this research is interested in the meaning of the commonly accepted and used words 'European Union' and 'democracy' as well as how they are established, contested and changed through the different ways of using language. Thus, the focus of the theoretical chapter is on the contestation over the meaning of a democratic European Union instead of what it looks like in reality, which normative research would analyse. Therefore, the analysis of the role of language and discourse in the articulation and formation of political reality in the European Union considers the premises of the social constructivist research tradition. Moreover, the theoretical chapter reflects on the purpose of humanistic research, which is to analyse what individuals think, feel, and say as creative human beings through which reality is shaped.

- **Methodology:** The chosen methodology is based on Critical Discourse Analysis suitable to study actors' struggles over the creation of different meanings for the same concept. To analyse the various legitimation strategies actors are using to convey legitimacy over the meaning they create, the relationship of linguistic means is analysed through a set of analytical concepts offered by CDA.
- **Validity and Reliability:** Acknowledging the researcher's potential subjectivity in qualitative research, the interpretative nature of the current study will guide the concrete steps taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the dissertation.

As each methodology and research design has its own advantages, shortcomings and challenges; and these need to be acknowledged. The main limitations have been identified as follows:

- **Linguistic limitation:** Although soundtracks of interpretations are available of each contribution given in the EP are available, the use of those is prohibited. Therefore, data has only been analysed in the languages spoken by the researcher, namely: Hungarian, English and French. Where applicable, the original version is indicated in the footnotes throughout the study.
- **Time and scope limitation:** The established time frame of the study has limited the number of debates included in the analysis. For this reason, the research question was defined with a narrow aim; thus, the results will only reflect directly on the two selected debates. Therefore, it is important to note that the analysis does not represent the opinion of the EP or MEPs as a whole and cannot be considered representative of all debates on European democracy. However, as demonstrated in chapter 3.1 in *Table 1*. each of the seven political groups and thus ideologies are represented in the selected data.
- **Analytical limitation:** One of the main disadvantages of discourse analysis in general (and more specifically CDA) lies in the large array of approaches (philosophical, theoretical, and methodological) and concepts available within the field. This allows researchers to create their own methodological 'blend' but provides complexity and lack of clarity in terms of methodological choices.<sup>10</sup> To avoid such problems, the current

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<sup>10</sup> Amandine Crespy, "Analysing European Discourses," in *Research Methods in European Union Studies*, eds. Kennet Lynggaard, Ian Manners and Karl Löfgren (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2015), 110.

study applies a more explicit research design and explanation of analytical choices. Moreover, in discourse analysis, meaning is never fixed, making results momentary.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these delimitations, the findings and conclusions of the study shed important light upon the importance of linguistic articulations, especially in an institution like the European parliament, where the success of the elite's discourses has a substantial impact on the future development of the European Union.

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<sup>11</sup> Tebogo Mogashoa, "Understanding Critical Discourse Analysis in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)* 1, no. 7 (July 2014): 111.

## 2. Background and literature review

Following the introduction to the topic, research questions and overview of the structure, this chapter will set up the context of the study by providing an overview of the possible causes of the EU's democracy problem, which point to two directions: (1) Since the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the EU has faced multiple crises with economic, political, and social nature which are embodied in the rising level of Euroscepticism. (2) The EU's 'democratic deficit' dilemma stems from the mismatch between input and output democracy levels. After a critical evaluation of these, a presentation of the European Parliament's relevance in democratic legitimacy and legitimising public communication will be made, highlighting the importance of studying parliamentary debates in the EU. Then the focus will shift to presenting the work of researchers who have outlined the added value of discourse theory in studying Europe.

### 2.1. Crises and 'democratic deficit' in the European Union

The legitimacy of the EU became particularly important as the EU extended its influence over more and more policy areas, directly affecting the lives of nearly 450 million citizens. For example, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 adopted a single currency, introduced the concept of European citizenship, and expanded the EU's supranational reach to new areas, such as common foreign and security policy, which previously belonged to the scope of national governments.<sup>12</sup>

The initial understanding of European integration was based on the '**Monnet method**', a sector-by-sector approach resting on the assumption that functional expertise rather than democratic participation would provide trust of those governed towards the political system.<sup>13</sup> An "ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe", as referred to in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, would have moved integration from an economic to a political level, eventually leading to a sense of identification with the European project and its achievements.<sup>14</sup> A strong executive body, the European Commission (EC), was supposed to provide 'output democracy' through positive policy outcomes produced by EU experts, which would have made the need for 'input

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<sup>12</sup> EUR-Lex, "*Summary of the Treaty of Maastricht on European Union*," accessed August 12, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:xy0026>.

<sup>13</sup> Smismans, "Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union," 128.

<sup>14</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service, "The Rome Treaties: towards an 'Ever Closer Union'," accessed August 12, 2021, <https://epthinktank.eu/2017/05/09/the-rome-treaties-towards-an-ever-closer-union/>.

democracy’ or public participation redundant.<sup>15</sup> This functional approach, however, has been widely challenged.

Over the past two decades, the European Union has faced several crises of various nature that have not only questioned the existence of a shared European identity but also the legitimacy of the existence of the European project itself. Although at the beginning of the century, the perception of further European integration promised more economic and social stability, the financial crisis in 2008 resulted in recession, unemployment and led to a Eurozone crisis and deepening tensions among Member States. The instability of Europe’s neighbourhood resulted in the upsurge of migratory flows in 2015, questioning the functionality of European migration policy and raising concerns about security and the integrity of national identity. These events, moreover, gradually contributed to the development and strengthening force of populism, nationalism and Euroscepticism in the Member States, cumulating a social crisis among citizens and, in the case of the UK, resulting in disintegration from the EU. The decision of British citizens to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016 was believed to have historical importance as many feared it could spark a domino effect that could mean “the beginning of the end of the European Union”.<sup>16</sup> In 2020, the devastating coronavirus crisis further shook confidence in the European Union, pointing out the lack of European solidarity, one of the basic foundations of European construction. As German Chancellor Angela Merkel noted in her speech just a few weeks after the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, “Europe, the EU, is facing its biggest test since its foundation”.<sup>17</sup>

Against this background, some scholars argue that the EU does not suffer from a ‘democratic deficit’ but rather a credibility crisis.<sup>18</sup> Stemming from Andrew Moravcsik’s liberal intergovernmentalism approach to European integration, Moravcsik and Giandomenico Majone argue that the EU is an extension of member state governments’ regulatory policies. This only aims at achieving efficient policy outcomes, which would be jeopardised by the short-term

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<sup>15</sup> Smismans, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union,” 128.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine de Vries, “Benchmarking Brexit: How the British Decision to Leave Shapes EU Public Opinion,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 55, no. S1 (September 2017): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12579>.

<sup>17</sup> Joshua Posaner and Judith Mischke, “Angela Merkel: Coronavirus ‘biggest test’ yet for EU,” *POLITICO*, April 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-coronavirus-biggest-test-yet-eu/>.

<sup>18</sup> Giandomenico Majone, “The Credibility Crisis of Community Regulation,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38, no. 2 (June 2000): 288, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00220>.

policy preferences of the political majority.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix recall that any kind of democratic polity requires arenas of political contestation and institutions that ensure that policies address citizens' preferences. These are essential elements of even the "thinnest" theories of democracy", providing the difference from authoritarianism.<sup>20</sup> On these grounds, the role of the European Parliament in providing such an arena will be addressed in the following section.

## **2.2. Why are European Parliamentary debates important?**

To establish the relevance of European Parliamentary debates in defining the European project, this section will provide an overview of how argumentations of ideas by political actors can become political action, thus, shape political and social reality.

The importance and impact of parliamentary debates are closely tied with the question of legitimacy in liberal democratic systems, including the European Union. Communication in public organisations often referred to as public communication, is essential for input legitimacy or 'government by the people' provided by citizens' participation in policymaking.<sup>21</sup> In the context of the European Parliament, public communication, including publicly available parliamentary debates, press releases, posts on social media platforms and media outlets, serve to make the European Parliament internally legitimate to its members and externally legitimate to citizens and civil society. Therefore, public communication in the EU is particularly important, as it ensures *electoral participation* by providing knowledge of different issues on the political agenda, enables *citizen participation* in policymaking through providing information, promotes political actors' *responsiveness* to their electorates' needs and ensures *accountability* towards citizens about the policy options chosen and their impact on people's daily lives.<sup>22</sup>

Debates in the European Parliament are constrained by a specific institutional setting where there is a limited amount of time for each intervention influencing the nature of the debates.

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<sup>19</sup> Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix, "Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 44, no. 3 (September 2006): 537, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00650.x>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 533.

<sup>21</sup> Chiara Valentini and Georgia Nesti, eds., *Public Communication Public Communication in the European Union: History, Perspectives and Challenges* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.



Communication in the EP is highly relevant, which serves as a justification of representatives' political positions towards their constituencies and the public, making debates important legitimating communicative discourses. As opposed to this, other institutions, such as the European Commission, fulfil different communicative purposes, namely technical policy explanations to a specialist audience constituting coordinative discourses. Moreover, discourses in certain settings contribute to the success of political ideas, demonstrating that discourses can do a lot more than talk. They constrain what is possible in terms of action, as well as "what is sayable" by actors in a political setting. This also explains the vagueness of speeches, allowing them to be interpreted in various ways in the future in a changing political context, avoiding "rhetorical entrapment".<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, discourses are relevant as it was defined by one of the proponent scholars of social constructivism, Thomas Risse, "it is through discursive practices that agents make sense of the world and attribute meaning to their activities".<sup>24</sup> In the construction of concepts and ideas with a commonly accepted importance, such as 'liberal democracy' or the 'rule of law', the role of language and political discourse is crucial. Through communicative actions taking place in the European institutions, especially in the European Parliament, actors continuously contest, describe, and shape the social and political reality of the European Union as well as the impact it plays in citizens' everyday lives. As discourse analysis emphasizes the power clashes of actors over creating meaning and reflects on the disproportionate power of different actors of society over discourses, thus reality, it is one of the most used approaches within social constructivism.<sup>25</sup>

### **2.3. Discourse and EU studies**

Over the past two decades, social constructivist research, as well as discourse theory and analysis, gained a significant role in the study of EU politics. The popularity of the constructivist approach in researching European integration lies in its ability to capture the continuing and changing process of integration while taking into consideration the impact of social elements, norms and identity politics in it.<sup>26</sup> This is one of the basic preconceptions of constructivism

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<sup>23</sup> Vivien A. Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (January 2008): 310-13.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Risse, "Social Constructivism and European Integration," in *European Integration Theory*, eds. Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 2nd edition), 134.

<sup>25</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 1, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen and Antje Wiener, eds. *The Social Construction of Europe* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 3.

originating from the work of Wendt. Interests are socially constructed rather than materially given, as neorealist and neoliberal accounts of the world would suggest.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, collectively understood concepts, such as what the European Union or EU democracy is, are a result of intersubjective and contested meanings of different elements that constitute the EU and a democratic system, instead of pre-setting ideas of European institutions and actors that shape political action on a European level.<sup>28</sup> Based on its meta-theoretical and ontological assumptions, the social constructivist theory is well-suited to analyse written and spoken interactions or texts, such as treaties, communications, speeches or political debates of European actors and institutions.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Diez, professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Tübingen, has introduced discourse analysis as a field of research through his early works on the effects of discourses on the future of European governance and democracy. Instead of adding to the normative debate over democracy, Diez aims at defining possible solutions to the EU's democratic deficit through empirical analysis. In a special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy*, Diez explored the role of discourse in the construction of the European Union and integration. "My please is therefore to include discourse analysis in the canon of approaches in European studies. [Discourse analysis] introduces a new 'face of power'. [...] it adds an important dimension to the predominant focus on ideas and institutions within social constructivism studies of European integration..."<sup>30</sup>

Diez argues that introducing discourse theory and research into studying the social, political, or institutional nature of the European Union is necessary as discourses do not only describe the discussed polity or concepts but also participate in their construction. Therefore, the researcher can analyse the political contestation of certain concepts, such as democracy or legitimacy within the EU, through which language points towards possible alternatives of future integration.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 92-138.

<sup>28</sup> Ben Rosamond, "Theorizing the European Union after Integration Theory," in *European Union Studies*, eds. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th Edition, 2019), 91.

<sup>29</sup> Christiansen et al., *The Social Construction of Europe*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Diez, "Speaking 'Europe'," 86.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

Since the early studies of Diez, discourse theory has been used by scholars in various fields of political and sociological research. One of such fields is the study of political communication (see, e.g., Hall 1993), where researchers analyse how the EU, or its policies, are legitimised discursively and point towards future alternatives of European integration (see, e.g., Diez 1999, 2001; Schmidt 2006). Another field is media discourse and European Public Sphere (see, e.g., Triandafyllidou et al. 2009) with studies focusing on the transformative power of communicative discourse, which aims at legitimizing policy or institutional decisions towards the public (see, e.g., Crespy 2010; Dimitrova and Kortenska 2017; Schmidt 2017). Others focus on certain EU policies (see, e.g., Buckingham 2013; Wodak and Boukala 2014: 171–190), including the evaluation of discursive constructs against what is considered to be legitimate based on ideological grounds (see, e.g., Heinrich 2015; De Ville; Orbie 2013) or the analysis of the definition of European polity or sense of belonging in national identity discourses (see, e.g., Wæver 1990; Larsen, 1999 and 2014).<sup>32</sup> However, Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen, and Antje Wiener noted that there is a lack of analysis around certain discursive constructs such as the democratic deficit, which is, as indicated, largely intertwined with discussions defining the meaning of democracy in the EU.<sup>33</sup>

As demonstrated by the short overview of the extensive literature on European democracy, there is a diverse academic discussion on what would increase legitimacy and general trust in the European Union. These are based on various concepts of what the European Union is, how it should democratically function and what it should look like in the future. The European Union's recent effort to protecting and strengthening European democracy with European citizens at the core of this process gives new space for analysis on the terms used to speak about European democracy and integration today, how they are constructed by language by political actors and institutions, which contexts are they framed by and what do they imply for the future of the European Union. European parliamentary debates and speeches offer a diverse option for the analysis of discourses on EU democracy and the possible solutions to one of its most prominent deficiencies, the democratic deficit.

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<sup>32</sup> Kennet Lynggaard, *Discourse Analysis and European Union Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2019), 6-9, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed August 12, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Christiansen et al., *The Social Construction of Europe*, 15.

### **3. Theoretical and methodological framework**

This chapter will set the philosophical, epistemological, and ontological positions on which this dissertation is based, as well as provide the theoretical and methodological framework. Firstly, it will provide details on the criteria used to select the corpus of the study and its implications. Secondly, the social constructivist research tradition will be presented, and then, the focus will shift to European identity and the concrete models of identity by Thomas Risse. Thirdly, the process of how power is exercised by those who have control over public discourses, including MEPs will be established. Then, the concrete theoretical model, the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, will be presented. The section on methodology will explain each step of the analysis, including the first step of coding and the second step of interpreting the identified analytical categories with the help of the chosen analytical tools from CDA for the analysis of the text's linguistic features and meaning, including how different patterns of legitimation appear in the discourses. Finally, given the particular theoretical and methodological choices made, this chapter will consider the problematic aspects of qualitative research, social constructivist research and discourse analysis.

#### **3.1. Data allocation and delimitations**

The framework of the analysis is constituted by the aim of this dissertation, namely, to capture debates of MEPs under the current 9<sup>th</sup> legislature (2019-2024), which refer to both the topic of European democracy and the future of the European Union. As a first step of the analysis, a smaller number of texts were selected, which has been done after an initial review of existing studies in the field as well as the overview of relevant texts. Keywords on the European Parliament's database of parliamentary debates were identified and searched.<sup>34</sup> These words included 'European democracy', 'legitimacy', 'citizens' and 'future of Europe'. This way, three relevant topics were found that were debated in the European Parliament within the given time scope. There were two debates at the Conference on the Future of Europe, a debate on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Schuman Declaration and a debate during which MEPs took stock of the 2019 European elections. Although debates on the Schuman Declaration and the 2019 European elections could have potentially contributed to the understanding of different democracy

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<sup>34</sup> European Parliament, "European Parliament Plenary," accessed August 13, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/debates-video.html>.

discourses, the number of speeches referring to both chosen focal points of the analysis were highly limited. As the analysable data would not have been representative of each political group, it was decided not to include them. Moreover, without the applied time-limited search criteria, several other debates of previous legislatures could have been considered, for example, the resolution of 16 February 2017 on improving the functioning of the European Union building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty or the resolution of 13 February 2019 on the state of the debate on the future of Europe. In a broader analysis of existing democratic discourses in the European Parliament, these could have contributed to a larger comparative study focusing on the potential discursive conflicts and critical evaluation of legitimate articulations of the European Union and European democracy over time and between different legislatures. Nonetheless, focusing only on the two debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe, a timely and relevant topic, allows me to conduct an in-depth analysis of the latest effort to reforming the European Union, providing a basis for future discourse analytical studies in the field.

The *Resolution on the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe* was tabled to the European Parliament Plenary on 9 January and was debated on 15 January 2020.<sup>35</sup> The report reiterates the important role of the European Parliament as the only directly elected EU institution and gives recommendations on the objective, scope, timing, governance, and outputs of the Conference. It also refers to the Conference as an opportunity to make the EU more democratic through discussions on several topics, such as European values, environmental challenges, and the climate crisis, as well as the democratic and institutional aspects of the EU. Moreover, it cites the debate that took place on 13 February 2019 on the future of Europe, emphasizing the need to establish a permanent mechanism that links citizens to discussions on the future of Europe. Although the proposal by the President-Designate of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, on 16 July 2019 called for a two-years long exercise to launch already on 9 May 2020, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic delayed the process, which resulted in a second debate on 17 June.

Ahead of this debate, the resolution reiterated the position voted in January and urged the Council of the European Union to adopt its position on the Conference. The report refers to the

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<sup>35</sup> European Parliament, "European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe," accessed August 13, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html).

health, economic, political and societal aspects of the COVID-19 crisis serving as an underlying reason which, according to MEPs, made the need to reform the European Union even more pressing.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the context of the first analysed debate representing the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe is slightly different as it took place after European governments introduced countrywide lockdowns and limited the movement of citizens, goods and services as well as their right to assemble putting pressure on various democratic rights. The changing context provides an inevitable additional layer of analysis of MEPs' discourses that will be reflected on during the presentation of the results.

During the two parliamentary debates on the Conference, in total, 136 speeches were held, excluding those by the representatives of other EU institutions present during the debates, such as the European Commission and Council of the European Union. The official positions and suggestions of these two institutions are excluded from the current analysis; however, they could be part of a further research project on the topic, which could extend its scope to assessing and comparing the discourses of the three institutions in question. Further delimitations to the scope of the analysis are presented by the multilingual aspect of the analysed debates.

During debates in the European Parliament, contributions can be made in several formats, including in the 24 official languages of the European Union. The User's Guide of the Plenary, which was revised in 2019, specifies that a verbatim report of the proceedings and transcripts of each sitting is published in the Official Journal of the European Union as a multilingual document in which all oral contributions appear in the original official language.<sup>37</sup> Although soundtracks of interpretations are available of each contribution, given that they are broadcasted live on the Parliament's website, it is stated that these interpretations do not constitute an authentic record of proceedings but serve to facilitate communications between MEPs. The disclaimer also specifies that unless expressly authorised by the European Parliament, the use

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<sup>36</sup> European Parliament, "Motion for a resolution to wind up the debate on the statements by the Council and the Commission pursuant to Rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe," accessed August 13, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0170\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0170_EN.html).

<sup>37</sup> European Parliament, "The Plenary: a User's Guide," accessed August 13, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sed/doc/ext/manual/Plenary\\_guide\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sed/doc/ext/manual/Plenary_guide_en.pdf), 26-27.

of the recorded interpretation is strictly prohibited.<sup>38</sup> For the aforementioned reasons, the analysis will focus only on those contributions which were made in one of the languages spoken by the researcher, namely English, French, and Hungarian. Moreover, nine speakers were excluded who are no longer Members of the EP as of 31 January 2020, when the United Kingdom has officially left the European Union after nearly three years of negotiations between the two parties.

Thus, the analysis includes 51 speeches made by 33 Members of the European Parliament, including blue card questions and responses as well as written statements that are not more than 200 words and can be handed in after the debate. For this reason, it is important to specify that due to these linguistic delimitations, the analysis does not give a full account of the opinion of the EP as a whole and cannot be considered representative of all debates on European democracy and future of Europe discussions, either all Members of the European Parliament. Deep textual analysis of the selected material, however, will help uncover the various legitimacy discourses that are competing against each other to fix the meaning of European democracy and thus, imply members' influence over constructing the future of the European Union and citizens' identity.

The list of Members whose contributions are included are indicated in the following table:

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<sup>38</sup> European Parliament, "Sitting of 17-06-20," accessed August 13, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20200617-19:05:18&playerEndTime=20200617-19:49:00#>.

<b>EPP</b>	<b>Renew</b>	<b>S&amp;D</b>	<b>Greens</b>	<b>ECR</b>	<b>ID</b>	<b>NA</b>
Hélène Laporte	Guy Verhofstadt	Domènec Ruiz	Damian Boeselager	Ryszard Antoni Legutko	Jordan Bardella	Carles Puigdemont i Casamajó
Danuta Maria Hübner	Charles Goerens	Devesa Lara Wolters	Daniel Freund			Fabio Massimo Castaldo
Eva Maydell	Dacian Cioloş	István Ujhelyi	Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield			Gunnar Beck
Geoffroy Didier	Gilles Boyer	Klára Dobrev	Niklas Nienaaß			László Trócsányi
Karlo Ressler	Katalin Cseh	Miapetra Kumpula-Natri	Patrick Breyer			
Mairead McGuinness	Pascal Durand	Raphaël Glucksmann				
Manfred Weber		Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz				
Radan Kanev						
Vladimír Bilčík						

*Table 1. Members of the European Parliament per party group whose speeches are included in the analysis*

The above table demonstrates that the linguistic delimitation, thus the number of MEPs whose speeches were included in the analysis from each political party, could potentially impact the results. The implications of the delimitations and the concrete steps taken to improve the validity and reliability of the study will be discussed at the presentation of the theory and methodology applied in the study.



## 3.2. Theory

### 3.2.1. Social Constructivism, European politics and identity

Risse adopts the social ontology that “human agents do not exist independently from their social environment and its collectively shared systems of meanings”.<sup>39</sup> This, however, does not remove the agent from constructing its own reality but rather suggests that structures and agents mutually construct and reproduce social reality through their daily practices, including the use of language, proposing a humanist view of the world. European identity as part of social reality is not an exception either. Instead, identity is a specific construct in time and space, which changes depending on the political and social context it is embedded in. Like other constructed meanings, European identity remains to be contested with the intention of fixing its social and political meaning in the collective understanding of individuals.<sup>40</sup>

In the context of the European Union, the constructivist perspective claims that previous institutional decisions and debates impact the interest of political actors, the Member States, and the identity of societies. Thus, the current study that adopts such constructivist ontology will focus on the continuous struggles, contestations, and discourses on what the European Union is, what legitimates its existence and how it should look like in the future.<sup>41</sup>

Thomas Risse argues that for the study of European identity, it is essential also to analyse discursive construction of meanings such as ‘Europe’, ‘European Union’, ‘democracy’ or ‘legitimacy’. This argument demonstrates that in the social constructivist domain, the study of European integration goes hand in hand with identity formation and politics. For this reason, Risse has studied different models of constructing European identity throughout European integration discourse and concluded that it is no longer appropriate to limit the question of European identity in zero-sum terms but rather how different levels of socio-political belongings to a certain community relate to each other. Since both the nation-state and the European Union are ‘imagined communities’ (as cited in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1991), belonging to one or the other

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<sup>39</sup> Risse, “Social Constructivism and European Integration,” 131.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 130-132.

community does not need to be exclusive but rather complementary.<sup>42</sup> The concept of ‘nested identity’ refers to having multiple levels of identities inside one another, such as regional, national, and European. Identities can also be ‘cross-cutting’, according to which some members of an identity group also belong to another, but this is not true for all members of the community. In Risse’s categorization, this constitutes a group of ‘exclusive nationalists’, who only identify with their nation and ‘inclusive nationalists’ who are perceived to be attached both to their nations and Europe at the same time.<sup>43</sup> According to Risse, identity overlaps with the level of support of the individual towards cooperation on the EU level, thus their support for further integration. In terms of the current analysis, the type of identity the speaker aims to constitute will imply their current and future vision of the EU, helping to answer the defined research questions.

For the above-mentioned reasons, when analysing public discourse on the European project and democracy, it is equally important to take identity politics into account as it eventually contributes to shaping the reality and range of options for the European Union as a social construct. Thus, attempts to fixing European identity in the analysed debates will be taken into consideration when determining the constitutive aspect of the debate.

### **3.2.2. The power of language and discourse**

As identified earlier, constructivists believe that language plays a central role in defining and shaping social reality; therefore, the study of language gained importance in social sciences and humanities and several of its sub-fields, including European studies. According to constructivists, language should not be understood as a mere description of existing reality but rather as a carrier of information, ideas, facts, identities, and norms that contribute to constituting reality, including changes in their meaning over time. However, they claim that reality can only be understood through the analysis of discourses that aim to define it.<sup>44</sup>

On the definition of language, Jacques Derrida, a French poststructuralist, formed a radical understanding of reality which claims that “there is nothing outside of the text.”<sup>45</sup> However, this

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas Risse, “European Institutions and Identity Change: What Have We Learned?” in *Transnational Identities. Becoming European in the EU*, eds. Richard K. Herrmann, Thomas Risse and Marilynn B. Brewer (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 248.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 248-250.

<sup>44</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 1, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 158.

thesis is going to adopt a more moderate approach based on Laclau and Mouffe: reality can be accessed through language, which does not only represent but also construct reality itself. This, however, does not imply the denial of the existence of an external reality. Consequently, language is central to our knowledge of reality not only as a ‘channel’ of communication but also as a ‘machine’ of constructing the social world, including social identities and relations.<sup>46</sup>

Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, in their book *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, take account of the general philosophical assumptions that establish most discourse analytical approaches, based on the works of Vivien Burr and Kenneth Gergen. Firstly, as opposed to rationalist and positivist concepts of knowledge, the world and reality should not be treated as objective truth but as products of the discourses of different actors.<sup>47</sup> In the context of the European Parliament, this highlights the importance of political debates, contestation as well as the particular vocabulary used to define the reality of the EU.<sup>48</sup> Secondly, knowledge is a product of historically and culturally produced discourses, which can change over time. Consequently, discourse can be defined as follows: “a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world - including knowledge, identities and social relations - and thereby in maintaining specific social patterns.”<sup>49</sup>

This implies that EU institutions and political actors do not have a pre-determined identity or position; those are, as well as the social world, constructed socially and discursively. Thirdly, Burr and Gergen argue that our knowledge and understanding of the world are created through social interactions competing about what is true and false, which eventually means that different social understandings of the world lead to different social actions from human beings. This implies that discourse analysis can capture how actors’ different ideas of social and political concepts will legitimize or dismiss certain actions or solutions.<sup>50</sup>

In discourse analysis and theory, there is a wide range of approaches to studying language, knowledge, reality, identity, and discourses that constitute the world. These also apply different philosophical, theoretical, and methodological premises, including an understanding of

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<sup>46</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 1, 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Christiansen et al., *The Social Construction of Europe*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 1, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism* (London: Routledge, 2015, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition), 5, <https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.4324/9781315715421>.

discourse. Michel Foucault has been one of the philosophers having played a central role in developing discourse analysis and theory. Moreover, he has influenced the works of other scholars in the field. Therefore, it is important to introduce his theoretical assumptions of discourse. Before moving on to the description of the particular discourse theory and method, this thesis will apply. The central position of Foucault is that ‘reality’ cannot be known outside of discourse, thus “We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them.”<sup>51</sup> This definition points toward the power that is embedded in discourse through producing the social world and the ways the world can be talked about. For this reason, the contestation of certain concepts is a central political (power) struggle, which does not only take place between politicians but also discourses – between different ways of constructing the world.<sup>52</sup>

### **3.2.3. Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory**

The theoretical underpinning of this thesis is based on the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as presented in their work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). The assumptions made in this section are also based on the illustration and analysis of their theory by Jørgensen and Phillips and are directed at the research questions of this dissertation.

The underlying idea of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory is that social phenomena are never fixed or total; therefore, there is an ongoing struggle over the fixation of their meaning, which results in social effects. A discourse, as everything else is always contingent, possible but not necessary: ongoing attempts for the fixation of the meaning of signs will never completely succeed.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, democracy discourse in the European Parliament is understood as the struggle of different Members of the European Parliament to fix the meaning of Europe, the European Union and democracy in the EU, thus propose solutions that legitimise the existence of the European Union towards citizens.

Within a particular discourse, there are certain *discursive nodal points* that are stabilized by tying them to other discourses on more general concepts. Through this process, metanarratives

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<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in *Untying the Text*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 67.

<sup>52</sup> Diez, "Speaking 'Europe'," 90-91.

<sup>53</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 2, 2-6.

of already established discourses can organise a discourse.<sup>54</sup> For example, in EU political discourses, ‘EU democracy’ is a nodal point that gains its meaning through being tied to other concepts, such as ‘free elections’, ‘freedom’ and ‘democratic rights’. However, EU democracy could also be part of several different discourses. For instance, related to European governance, in an intergovernmental discourse, democracy would be tied to the sovereignty of the nation-state and subsidiarity, claiming that democratic accountability in the EU is sufficient from national parliaments. In contrast, in a federalist discourse, making the EU more democratic would be mentioned with the need to strengthen the role of the European Parliament as a democratic oversight of European citizens. Laclau and Mouffe categorise elements with several competing ways of defining their meaning. “For example, a signifier like ‘democracy’ is essentially ambiguous by dint of its widespread political circulation: it acquires one possible meaning when articulated with ‘anti-fascism’ and a completely different one when articulated with ‘anticommunism’.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, ‘EU democracy’ in political discourse is both a nodal point – point of reference for the common understanding of other concepts that are tied to it, such as ‘representation’, ‘accountability’ or ‘legitimacy’ is part of an ongoing (political social) struggle to fix their meaning.

As demonstrated in the literature review at the beginning of the dissertation, the EU’s democratic legitimacy problem is attributed to different political, social, or cultural components. Thus, in the normative debate of democracy, solutions proposed by those who ideally see the EU as a representative democracy would be different from those such as Habermas, who apply a deliberative democratic theory. The same applies to competing discourses, which are likely to propose different descriptions, reasons and solutions to the EU’s democracy problem based on the ideological way the speakers see the world. This is in line with how Jørgensen and Phillips describe Laclau and Mouffe’s definition of politics: the organisation of society in a particular way that excludes all other possible ways. With this logic, a struggle of discourses means that

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Diez, “Europe as a Discursive Battleground: Discourse Analysis and European Integration Studies,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 36, no. 1 (March 2001): 16-17, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.45084011&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>55</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on The Revolution of Our Time*, (London: Verso, 1990), 28.

different actors wish to organise society, influence identity, and make sense of the world in different ways.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, articulations of ideas on the political level shape how we act and think, therefore how we create society: the political has primary over the social dimension of reality.<sup>57</sup> Adopting this approach to the study of European integration and governance, the struggle over conceptualization of certain terms, as in the case of this dissertation, “EU democracy” does not come from the struggle between competing interests in a narrow ‘economic’ sense, but from competing discourses.<sup>58</sup> Another important element of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of the social is identity. “Identities are something you accept and negotiate in discursive processes and thus they can be understood as something completely social”.<sup>59</sup>

Discourses taking place in the European Parliament have the potential to change citizens’ understanding of the purpose, values, and function of the European Union. Through these articulations, they also have the possibility to influence and modify identities as well as other elements of the social world. The debate over identity in the EU is particularly interesting from this point of view. As Larsen demonstrates in his studies on how ‘Europe’ is articulated differently in various discourses in Denmark, it is highly relevant how the national identity of Danishness is defined in relation to European identity.<sup>60</sup> While national identity is taken for granted and remains unquestioned in discourses, the existence of a European identity is discursively contested in political debates, opening the possibility to change its meaning, thus for a European identity to emerge.<sup>61</sup> This view of politics and articulation implies the power of politicians over the people who have less control over certain discourses than the political elite. The focus on the influential role of the elite is also inherent in Critical Discourse Analysis, which will be discussed as moving on to describing the methodology of the study.

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<sup>56</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 2, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on The Revolution of Our Time*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> Diez, “Europe as a Discursive Battleground,” 6.

<sup>59</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 107.

<sup>60</sup> Henrik Larsen, “Discourses of state identity and post-Lisbon national foreign policy: The case of Denmark,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 49, no. 3 (2014): 368-69.

<sup>61</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 2, 27-8.

### 3.3. Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis

Although this dissertation builds on the theoretical concepts established by Laclau and Mouffe in their work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from 1985 and several other writings from Laclau, *discourse theory* does not propose a large array of tools for textual analysis. In *Critical Discourse Analysis*, however, the text is in the centre of the analysis, distinguishing it from Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory which does not carry out a systematic language analysis. For this reason, CDA is more suitable to analyse the chosen empirical material that consists of transcribed speeches of MEPs.

CDA does not have a unified definition as it encompasses several approaches (e.g., Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive analysis or Fairclough's critical discourse analysis) with varying philosophical and theoretical assumptions, methodologies, and analytical tools.<sup>62</sup> For this reason, it is rather understood as a broader analytical movement to study the use and impact of discourses in communications, social and cultural studies.<sup>63</sup> Being used in critical social constructionist research, the aim of discourse analysis, including CDA, is to achieve social change. For this reason, these approaches often inherently include political ideologies that influence a text. This dissertation, however, does not aim to suggest that certain political views are considered to be better than others but to shed light upon the differing understandings of democracy in the European Union and open a discussion on their implications on the future of the EU. This opens the possibility to change, for instance, the future construction of the EU, public opinion, citizens' cultural and political identity, democratic participation, certain policies or the Treaties of the European Union.

Elected Members of the European Parliament need to communicate and justify their political views and choices to citizens and, at the same time, respond to their electorate's needs. Hence, Members need to use language to convey their understanding of social reality to citizens and bring about social change through sharing information, opinion and influencing receivers. Consequently, CDA focuses on different strategies of discursively influencing, manipulating, and legitimising their statement in the recipients' minds.<sup>64</sup> In line with these premises, Teun A. van Dijk explains CDA as follows: "CDA is essentially dealing with an oppositional study of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, chap. 2, 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, chap.1, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Teun van Dijk, "Aims of Critical Discourse Analysis," *Japanese Discourse* 1, no. 1 (1995): 18.

the structures and strategies of elite discourse and their cognitive and social conditions and consequences...”<sup>65</sup>

The above-outlined view that language is a tool to establish and maintain power is the basis of both the previously presented discourse theory and Fairclough’s three-dimensional analytical framework, suitable for empirical research in the field of communications. According to CDA, every occasion when language is used is a communicative event that consists of three dimensions. In the context of the current study, these can be explained as follows:

- **First dimension:** is about the text. In the current study, this refers to the specific instances of language use by Members of the European Parliament where the analytical focus is on the linguistic features in the articulation of the European Union and EU democracy, the construction of the text and the different words used.
- **Second dimension:** is about the discursive practice. This refers to the context in which the text was produced and the function these debates fulfil in a democratic institution. This has been previously discussed when establishing the background of the study.
- **Third dimension:** is about social practice. This occurs on the level of social practice, norms, and social structures to which the communicative event belongs.<sup>66</sup>

The analytical focus of this thesis is constituted by the linguistic articulations used by MEPs in the EP throughout the selected debates. This is connected to the discursive practice, namely the role of parliamentary debates in providing different aspects of democratic accountability to how the EU functions. This highlights the importance of agents’ different access to discourses. According to van Dijk, powerful speakers who have access to or control over public discourse, such as MEPs, have a significant impact on how others think, making it relevant to study these powerful actors.<sup>67</sup>

This brings together discourses with social structures and helps to discover the underlying norms that construct society. However, the investigation of text is the most crucial of the three dimensions, as noted by Fairclough.<sup>68</sup> For this reason, the focus of the analysis is the linguistic

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Language and power* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 21.

<sup>67</sup> Teun van Dijk, “Aims of Critical Discourse Analysis,” 21-22.

<sup>68</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 232.



features of the speeches of MEPs during the two parliamentary debates. This will be analysed through the following two steps:

### **Step 1: Thematic analysis**

After the corpus selection has been made, as presented at the beginning of the current theoretical and methodological framework chapter, the next steps will entail coding and the definition of analytical categories. The order of these two steps follows an inductive research design, according to which the researcher first scans the entire material searching for relevant dimensions, meaning that the categories based on topical interpretation were continuously added to the codebook when found in the document.<sup>69</sup> Given the extensive amount of data, the manual coding has been done per two-three sentences or paragraphs, paying close attention to the meanings conveyed by the text, as suggested by Will C. van den Hoonaard.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, to ensure that no important discursive element was missing from the interpretatively established analytical categories, quantitative content analysis was conducted, defining the occurrence of the most frequently appearing words was counted. This way, several keywords have been identified, helping to guide the second step of the analysis, the interpretation of the data.

### **Step 2: Linguistic and rhetorical analysis**

In the second stage of the analysis, the relationship of the previously developed analytical categories is examined. At this stage, one must analyse the amount of data corresponding to each category. Through this second reading of the data, more specific linguistic features of each analytical category identified in the first step will be conducted. Although CDA analyses the different instances of language use, it is also important to address the lack of language and articulation as these can discover marginal ideas and potentially modify the results. The continuous examination and comparison of the relationship between these categories will result in the construction of the different discourses.

In terms of analytical tools, CDA offers a variety of linguistic and grammatic concepts, which will help to interpret the emerging patterns through the debates in terms of the different

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<sup>69</sup> Crespy, "Analysing European Discourses," 110-14.

<sup>70</sup> Will C. van den Hoonaard, "Inter- and Intracoder Reliability," in *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008): 445.

legitimation strategies being used to underpin the discourses. To uncover what the discourses are characterized by, the following tools will be utilized:

- **Modality:** reveals the extent to which speakers commit themselves to their own statements. This tool helps to discover the nuances of the language used by the speaker. For example, modalities like “think” or “perhaps” suggest a lower degree of certainty of the fact that has been stated. This is particularly interesting in terms of analysing the affiliation of speakers towards what is stated to be the truth. In this respect, certain statements have a strong knowledge claim, implying the confidence of the speaker in believing that the fact being stated is a generally accepted fact or truth. Whereas modal verbs, such as “may”, “can”, and “could”, and words like “well” or “bit” can suggest a lower affinity towards what is being said.<sup>71</sup>
- **Transitivity:** This concept describes the connection (or non-connection) of events to subjects and objects. In this regard, using a passive form can refer to the lack of assigned responsibility of actions, thus, revealing the underlying reasons behind a problem and the consequences of different uses of language.<sup>72</sup> Expressions without subjects seem more like non-negotiable facts.<sup>73</sup>
- **Nominalisation:** This refers to the process of deriving nouns from verbs and adjectives, resulting in the noun standing for a process, making the agent redundant and achieving a similar result as the previously presented concept.<sup>74</sup>
- **Contextualisation:** This tool helps the reader discover the context in which the text is produced and used. In this sense, “discourse can be seen as the process of activating a text by relating it to a context in use.”<sup>75</sup>

These two levels of analysis will formulate the analytical framework used to uncover and present each parallelly existing and competing discourse in the European Parliament. However, as noted

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<sup>71</sup> Norman Fairclough, “Discourse and text: linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis,” *Discourse & Society* 3, no. 2 (1992): 201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42887786>.

<sup>72</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 3, 20-21.

<sup>73</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2010), 269.

<sup>74</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 12-13.

<sup>75</sup> Mogashoa, “Understanding Critical Discourse Analysis in Qualitative Research,” 109.

by Crespy, discourse analysis often requires moving back and forth between the different stages.<sup>76</sup>

As emphasized by Jørgensen and Phillips, in discourse analysis, the researcher is responsible for developing her own coherent framework based on the combination of different discourse analytical perspectives. The freedom of choosing, mixing, and adapting the theoretical and methodological tools implies the influence of the researcher's choices on the outcome of the study and the results presented.<sup>77</sup> The concern of subjectivity is also shared by and social constructivist research in which fully objective knowledge of the researched topic does not exist. The researcher's subjectivism, to a certain extent, will always influence the interpretation of discursive articulations. Thus, similarly to how discourses do not only describe reality but also constitute it, as a researcher, the researcher herself will contribute to the discourses and knowledge formation on the studied object, the European Union. A certain level of subjectivity needs to be acknowledged. These concerns are further emphasized by the criticism of qualitative research methods. For these reasons, the reliability and validity concerns of the study and the concrete steps taken to increase the researcher's objectivity will be further discussed in the following chapter.

### **3.4. Validity and Reliability**

As discussed previously, the current study employs a qualitative research analytical approach, which, as any other type of research methods, contain potential 'bias', which need to be actively addressed by the researcher. Considering addressing potential relativism and subjectivism to ensure a high level of validity and reliability in qualitative research will be guided by the work and recommendations of several researchers, including Noble and Smith (2015), Shenton (2004) as well as Jørgensen and Phillips (2002). Different research domains use different terminology to what is known as validity and reliability in quantitative research. However, the terms 'validity' and 'reliability' will be continued to be used for clarity, even when they are referred to as alternatively in the above-mentioned researchers' works.

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<sup>76</sup> Crespy, "Analysing European Discourses," 110.

<sup>77</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 1, 4.

Validity refers to the criteria research must meet in order to reflect the data accurately.<sup>78</sup> The criteria to which qualified academic research should be measured up against is the subject of academic contestation itself. Reliability refers to the consistency of the analytical procedures, including personal and research method biases that may have influenced the findings. It also ensures that a study can be repeated by another researcher with the same results. According to Guba and Lincoln, the validity and reliability of qualitative research should be based on the criteria of trustworthiness.<sup>79</sup>

The precision of the data and validity is ensured by providing details of the data selection process and a 'decision trail' of how and why the analytical material has been reduced based on both the research aim and research delimitations. This is relevant for the transferability and replicability of the findings. This explains the step-by-step account given in the previous section about the data gathering and selection process. Moreover, a detailed account is given of how data has been narrowed down by the research aim, time limitations as well as the researchers' account of her linguistic skills enabling the analysis.<sup>80</sup> Since it is not possible to analyse all debates relevant to the research aim, there is a possibility that through the selection of a limited number of debates (to ensure feasibility), other relevant debates that took place in the European parliament are ignored. This could reduce the representativeness of the study. In the current study, the research question concerning parliamentary debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe narrows down the number of debates relevant to two, allowing me to draw conclusions to this specific debate and not to the European Parliament as an institution starting from its existence. This mechanism also helps to reduce the potential bias and inaccurate generalisation of the results.

The transcripts of the debates taking place in the European Parliament are available on the European Parliament's website and can be easily found if using the search words defined in the above sub-chapter. Several speeches, however, have been translated by the researcher, which can potentially reduce the replicability of the study. For this reason, when the speeches were not made in English but in the other two languages spoken by the researcher, namely Hungarian

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<sup>78</sup> Helen Noble and Joanna Smith, "Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research," *Evid Based Nurs* 18, no. 2 (April 2015): 34. Downloaded from <http://ebn.bmj.com/> on March 23, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew K. Shenton, "Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects," *Education for Information* 22 (2004): 64.

<sup>80</sup> Noble and Smith, "Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research," 35.

and French, for which translations have been used, original versions of those are included in the footnotes.

Having acknowledged that these delimitations and the researchers' potential ideological or philosophical bias could impact the results, long and verbatim extracts of MEPs will be presented in the analytical discussion. This is highly relevant to ensure reliability. Arguments made will be supported and illustrated by a detailed explanation of how each word, expression and specific instances of language use have been interpreted with the support of the analytical tools to ensure transparency and allow the reader to 'test' the claims made.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, to demonstrate that the findings emerge from the data and not the researcher's own preconceptions, a thick overview of discourse analytical approaches is provided, weighing them up against each other to acknowledge their compatibility with the research aim and each other as well as their shortcomings.<sup>82</sup> Discourse theory and the various analytical tools of Critical Discourse Analysis will be used as "'languages of description' and the application of the theory as a translation of the empirical material into its language."<sup>83</sup> This is called analytical re-description, which ensures that it is the analytical framework and empirical data that will guide the analysis and distance the researcher's own interpretations from the empirical material.<sup>84</sup> For the same reason, an inductive methodology has been applied, avoiding the empirical data being limited to already existing frameworks and allowing the identified analytical categories after the first reading to guide the articulation of the findings.

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<sup>81</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 6, 33.

<sup>82</sup> Shenton, "Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects," 64.

<sup>83</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, chap. 6, 12.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

## 4. Results and Analytical Discussion

The first section of this chapter will start by delineate the most frequently identified words through the qualitative overview of the data. This will be followed by the step of investigating the answers to the two research questions and three operational questions presented at the beginning of the dissertation. These were the following:

1. How do Members of the European Parliament ***define*** (highlight for emphasis) ***the European project*** in light of the EU's alleged 'democratic deficit' problem?
  - How MEPs ***diagnose*** (highlight for emphasis) the EU's democracy problem
  - How MEPs define the underlying ***causes*** (highlight for emphasis) of the EU's democracy problem
  - The ***solutions*** (highlight for emphasis) MEPs suggest increasing democracy in the EU and their implications for European integration
2. How do discourses of the MEPs on the European project ***potentially impact the construction of different forms of (European) identity?***

In sections two, three and four of this chapter, these research questions are answered on an ongoing basis through the linguistic and rhetorical interpretation of the data based on the chosen set of analytical tools were applied. This way, the discourses presented in each of these sections will be constructed through discovering the connections of the identified analytical categories.

### 4.1. Identification of keywords in the process of articulation

Through the first reading of the speeches, it quickly became evident that they are organised around several frequently used keywords, which are here called keywords. At the first steps of the analysis, these were able to give an overview of the empirical data; therefore, they are suitable to begin the investigation of how they relate to each other, thus, how discourses are organised. The particular set of keywords used by MEPs will be presented below.

By analysing the 51 speeches made by 33 Members during the two parliamentary debates, it was found that the word 'Europe' was used two hundred and sixty-one times, which is not surprising given the speech that took place in the European Parliament about the Conference on the future of Europe. The second most used word was 'citizen(s)', which appeared ninety-one times in total, followed by the word 'future' used fifty-ones times. Then, the word 'people(s)'

appeared thirty-eight times and ‘institution(s)’ thirty-six times. Other commonly used words and their variations were ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic’, ‘nation’, ‘national’ and ‘nationalism’, ‘European Union’ and ‘election(s)’ appearing thirty-five, twenty-nine, twenty-seven and nineteen times respectively. These words, whenever relevant, will be examined in relation to each other as well as the analytical categories developed through the coding.

Based on the thematic analysis presented above, the following three discourses can be identified. These will be discussed in turn in the following chapters in terms of how they answer the two overarching research questions mentioned above:

1. A European Union of Sovereign Nations
2. A Citizens’ European Union
3. The European Union as an International Actor

#### **4.2. A European Union of Sovereign Nations: The intergovernmental discourse**

The currently discussed discourse builds on the theory of intergovernmentalism, which has long been contributing to explaining the European integration process and has been placed against neo-functionalism as part of a classic debate between these two grand theories. As demonstrated in this section, the intergovernmental paradigm, although in some cases in transformed versions, has remained part of the European integration discourse. However, it is important to specify that here, intergovernmentalism serves as a model of European integration rather than a theory. In contrast to theory, the intergovernmental model does not only serve to explain integration but also to diagnose solutions to the problematic aspects and policy challenges of the current state of the EU.<sup>85</sup>

In the intergovernmental model, the understanding of cooperation stems from the classical theory of realism and neo-realism, according to which international cooperation serves the purpose of inter-state bargaining in areas where it is beneficial or crucial for state survival and national interests. The European Union is an institutionalised form of inter-state cooperation between governments which have their own sovereign entities. In this sense, membership in the EU is not based on ideological premises but on accepting that certain policy issues are more

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<sup>85</sup> Michelle Cini, “Intergovernmentalism,” in *European Union Politics*, eds. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th Edition, 2019), 70.

cost-efficient to confront through an institutionalized form of inter-state cooperation.<sup>86</sup> The quotes brought as an example below will demonstrate that the articulation of the European Union and the European project in the intergovernmental discourse draws on already established metanarratives of other existing discourses, such as the realist, neo-realist and neo-liberal discourses.

MEPs in favour of the intergovernmental model refer to European ‘cooperation’ rather than ‘integration’, which implies the underlying reason of governments working together, which is to improve the efficiency in policy areas that have been identified as the specific goal of cooperation. When mentioning the word ‘integration’, it is presented as a negative concept as it is placed around expressions and metaphors such as “greater competences for the Union at the expense of the Member States” or “the EU Commission is reaching for a narcotic overdose of EU integration.” On the other hand, the word ‘cooperation’ appears with positive adjectives and nouns such as ‘free’, ‘respect’, ‘hope’ and ‘sovereignities.’ Based on the analytical tools available in discourse theory, specific expressions in their capacity as articulations can establish further meaning by positioning words in particular relationships with one other. In this case, MEPs aim to exclude the possibility of further integration by delegitimising the actions of other agents, namely the European Commission and the European Parliament, in contrast to the Member States and national parliaments. It is also emphasized by conveying a certain truth modality. In both cases mentioned above, the speakers present their statements as a knowledge claim that are true and inconvertible, e.g., saying ‘the EU Commission is’ instead of ‘I think the EU Commission is.’ In this way, through stating information as fact, the speakers assert authority over the recipients of their speeches.

MEPs who construct the inter-governmental discourse are using the intergovernmental terminology in a consistent way while excluding other attempts to fix the meaning of the European Union, thus determining the possible solutions to the democratic legitimacy problem. In some cases, it is done explicitly, referring to the ideological opposite, an ‘ever closer union’ in line with the neo-functional approach and the federalist model of the European Union. Theorists of neo-functionalism, based on the theory of Ernst B. Haas, believe that co-operation in one policy area would pressure other policy areas to be reviewed and changed, leading to

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<sup>86</sup> Cini, “Intergovernmentalism,” 70-1.



further integration or the so-called *functional spillover*.<sup>87</sup> In this sense, the term ‘ever closer union’ refers to an ongoing integration process that can be understood as a way of resolving cross-national problems.

“So the attitude is that the aim justifies the means, the aim being ever closer union justifies the means, even distraining and ignoring the letter and the spirit of the Treaties.”

Ryszard Antoni Legutko (ECR) – 15 January 2020

The paragraph provides a good example of the legitimation concept established by van Dijk. Referring to the “spirit of the Treaties” and its certain provisions provides a legal argument from the speaker, implying law as the underlying reason to accept the statement as the non-negotiable truth and exercise their social power. Moreover, the above quote demonstrates that speakers legitimise the truthfulness of their statements through highlighting the failures of the EU as a supranational polity in contrast to what would benefit European nations and their citizens. Advocates of an ‘ever-closer union’ are placed opposite to the ‘people’, implying criticism of the elitist approach that neo-functionalism represents. In this criticism, while national governments are democratic and represent the will of the people, supranational institutions, such as the European Union, are driven by functional and technocratic interests of political elites and interest groups, leading towards further political and social integration without sufficient legitimacy provided from those governed.<sup>88</sup>

In line with these general premises, the EU’s democratic legitimacy problem is *diagnosed* as the lack of efficiency, output legitimacy and resilience in areas where the Member States are forced by external factors to cooperate with each other. When MEPs provide an evaluation of the *causes* of the lack of efficiency, the circumstances are ascribed to the European Union’s failure to respond to external factors such as globalization, the economic, financial, migration, and demographic crises, terrorist attacks, technological revolution, artificial intelligence, environmental challenges, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The European Union is not only open to criticism in its structure, it is also and above all in its policy. Protection of peoples in the face of savage globalization, defense of their identity,

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<sup>87</sup> Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), xiii.

<sup>88</sup> Carsten Strøby Jensen, “Neo-functionalism,” in *European Union Politics*, eds. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th Edition, 2019), 64.

artificial intelligence, technological revolution or even environment and ecology, your European model has made us miss everything.”<sup>89</sup>

Jordan Bardella, ID – 15 January 2020

“European states are currently facing a number of challenges. [...] They must say no to mass migration, which denies the values of European culture. They need to restart their economies in which they are doomed to cooperate. We therefore need a Union that helps the nations of Europe to do this.”<sup>90</sup>

László Trócsányi (EPP) – 17 June 2020

The first quote demonstrates that the European Union is placed into the subject position whenever a criticism or external challenges are mentioned. The concept of transitivity in CDA refers to the events that are connected to the objects or subjects. The European Union appears in the context of words such as ‘migration’, ‘environmental challenges’ or ‘defence’, suggesting the number of issues it has failed to respond to, implying as if the existence of these external factors deems from the faulty supranational European model. Such articulation suggests that some EU policies, for instance, migration policy, will never be successful and will remain decentralized as national preferences are formed by domestic social and political pressures, which depend on the degree of interdependence each Member State has regarding a certain policy issue.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, ‘European states’ are placed into the subject position whenever it comes to the protection of the ‘European peoples’ and the ‘values of European culture.’ This implies that some Member States see unilateral measures as more effective solutions to certain problems. This justifies, for example, re-established border control to stop the spread of Coronavirus or building fences to reduce migration and ultimately protect their national territories and their peoples.

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<sup>89</sup> “L’Union européenne n’est pas seulement critiquable dans sa structure, elle l’est aussi et surtout dans sa politique. Protection des peuples face à la mondialisation sauvage, défense de leur identité, intelligence artificielle, révolution technologique ou encore environnement et écologie, votre modèle européen nous a tout fait rater.”

<sup>90</sup> “Az európai államok jelenleg számos kihívással néznek szembe. Versenyképessé kell válniuk világszinten és biztonságot kell nyújtaniuk a polgáraiknak. Választ találniuk a társadalmaik elöregedéséből fakadó demográfiai kihívásra. Nemet kell mondaniuk az európai kultúra értékeit tagadó tömeges migrációra. Újra kell indítaniuk gazdaságaikat, amiben együttműködésre vannak ítélve. Olyan Unióra van tehát szükségünk, amely ebben nyújt segítséget az európai nemzeteknek.”

<sup>91</sup> Andrew Moravcsik and Frank Schimmelfennig, “Liberal Intergovernmentalism,” in *European Integration Theory*, eds. Anthe Wiener, Tanja A. Borzel and Thomas Risse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 74-75.

One example of the area of legitimate cooperation articulated by some Members would be a competitive European economy. Traditionally, however, economic growth is of secondary importance in the intergovernmental model.<sup>92</sup> The third quote starts with placing European states into the subject position, implying that the mentioned challenges could only be effectively solved on the national level. This, however, is in contrast with the last part of the sentence. Using the passive form ‘doomed to cooperate’ removes the agent making external factors responsible, which implies that certain domestic pressures, geopolitical concerns and economic interests could potentially provide legitimacy to transferring power from the national to the European level.

It is also important to evaluate this statement through CDA’s concept of contextualisation, considering the external context in which the speech was made to reconstruct the speakers’ intended message. A bit less than a month before the debate took place in the European Parliament, on 27 May 2020, the European Commission presented the largest economic stimulus package ever for the 27 Member States as part of its multiannual budget proposal for 2021-2027. A temporary recovery instrument, the Next-generation EU Fund would have allowed the EC to borrow and manage resources amounting to €750 billion on the financial markets on behalf of the EU and its Member States. As the economic element is usually missing from the traditional intergovernmental discourse, this statement suggests the struggle that is taking place over the meaning and function of the European construction. This articulation draws on both neoliberal and realist elements which can be traced back to the liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) approach that became dominant in EU governance studies in the 1990s. Moravcsik’s theory has based the assumption that the European Union is designed to manage economic interdependence through institutions that serve the common interest of Member States.<sup>93</sup>

However, moving on to the analysis of the articulation of the solutions to the EU’s democratic legitimacy problem, the discourse shifts back to the classical intergovernmental discourse.

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<sup>92</sup> Cini, “Intergovernmentalism,” 70.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 76-7.

“It [the Conference] is wrong because it gives the European Parliament the leading role in the process to the detriment of national parliaments, and the democratic legitimacy of national parliaments is far, far greater than that of the European Parliament.”

Ryszard Antoni Legutko (ECR) – 15 January 2020

“National parliaments are, on the one hand, the bearers of popular sovereignty and, on the other, the lords of the European treaties, so without them it could not be expected to outline a successful European vision.”<sup>94</sup>

László Trócsányi (EPP) – 15 January 2020

The way the first paragraph contrasts the European Parliament to national parliaments excludes the possibility of increasing the European Union’s democratic legitimacy with any measure that would give more power to the European level. In Fairclough’s CDA, it is equally important to analyse what has been articulated as it is to uncover what has not, providing an additional layer to the results. Therefore, it is interesting to mention that apart from one MEP generally referring to a ‘new European construction’, Members do not explicitly articulate which powers should the European Union and the European Parliament transfer back from the supranational level to the Member States. Instead, Members focus on emphasizing that further powers, such as the ‘transnational Spitzenkandidat process’, would only further decrease the EU’s legitimacy. The lack of articulated solutions suggests that even if the condition to increase legitimacy would be purely intergovernmental cooperation, there is a level of acceptance towards the EU’s institutional system as it is currently, showing a struggle between the liberal and realist discourses that the intergovernmental discourse draws on.

The second paragraph increases the authority of national parliaments through nominalisation and the use of a metaphor. These linguistic tools, together with the legal legitimation that is provided by the reference to the Treaties, makes the authority of national parliaments unquestionable and essential. In the third paragraph, the word ‘sovereignty’ is used in relation to emotive words, which diversify its meaning beyond its original concept. Sovereignty, which by definition is the “legal capacity of nation-states to take decisions without being subject to external restraints”,<sup>95</sup> appears to be used as a synonym for freedom, legitimacy and

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<sup>94</sup> “A nemzeti parlamentek egyfelől a népszuverenitás hordozói, másfelől az európai szerződések urai, így nélkülük nem remélhető sikeres európai jövőkép felvázolása.”

<sup>95</sup> Cini, “Intergovernmentalism,” 71.

independence building on emotions as a way of exercising power and constructing identity through linguistic articulation. Using the word ‘sovereignty’ in this context does not only regulate the role of governments in international affairs but also acts as an already established concept which defines what is meant by ‘European states.’. The meaning of sovereignty is not questioned. Using it in the context shown in the above excerpts does not only constrain the available options in terms of defining the future construct of the European Union but also the identities of the speakers and their audience.<sup>96</sup>

In this regard, the answer to the first research question based on the intergovernmental discourse is that MEPs ***define the European project*** as an instrument of sovereign national governments which decide to cooperate in certain policy areas only if and to the extent that serves their national interests and their citizens’ interests. Those MEPs who have constructed this discourse through their articulations argue that European integration has already gone too far in some policy areas and institutional powers, and further transfer of power from the national to the European level is considered illegitimate. The main actors and drivers of the European project are nation-states and not individuals. Thus, in the intergovernmental discourse, the source of legitimacy and democracy is restricted to the nation-state, and particularly national parliaments. It is through exercising national citizens’ rights to vote and to be represented by national politicians on the national level that an overall strengthened democracy in the EU can be achieved. Therefore, the ‘European Union of Sovereign States’ discourse struggles to fix the meaning of EU democracy as the cooperation between nations, which can be achieved through a strong European Council and national parliaments without the need to strengthen the role of the European Parliament further.

Although it is European nations or ‘they’ that are placed into the agent position of most of the sentences, the speakers also commonly refer to individuals as ‘European peoples’ or the ‘peoples of Europe’ as opposed to ‘citizens’ or ‘people’ which will be seen in other discourses. The different uses of these concepts have strong discursive implications on ***constructing identity***. Using the plural version of the word builds upon concepts related to each individual state and nation, where people are “attached to their land, their country, their great man” and

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<sup>96</sup> Risse, “Social Constructivism and European Integration,” 131.

share the same culture and language.<sup>97</sup> In the context of other emotive words, such as sovereignty, freedom and independence, the word ‘they’ instead of ‘we’ also helps to separate the speaker from those of other nations, even if they share the same world view. In Risse’s terms, such articulation constructs an ‘exclusive national identity’ to which any other form of identity is perceived as a threat. Therefore, the existence of European identity or *demos* cannot be expected as the basis for the parliamentary expression of democracy on the European level.<sup>98</sup>

### **4.3. A Citizens’ European Union: The federalist discourse**

The federalist discourse on the European Union suggests a very distinct understanding of the European project. In relation to European governance, the political debate over a federalist model has started with the speech of Germany’s Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, who referred to the EU in the future as a ‘European Federation’ based on the model of the German Federal State.<sup>99</sup> His speech inspired the establishment of the Convention on the Future of Europe as well as several politicians, who believed that the European Union as a system of divided power between supranational, national, and subnational institutions could mean the end-goal of European integration. In line with this proposition, federalism refers to a “spatial or territorial division of power between two (or more) levels of government in a given political system” tied together in a central decision-making process.<sup>100</sup> On the basis of existing federal models, such as the United States of America, this would mean the establishment of a ‘United States of Europe’. Although the word ‘federal’ only appears six times in the analysed data and is often referred to from a negative perspective, some MEPs explicitly mention their intention to establish a federal EU.

“I call for an alliance of the brave. Let us build a United States of Europe, and I promise that the next generation is going to be proud of us in exactly the same way as we are proud of the founding fathers of the Union.”

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<sup>97</sup> “Les peuples sont attachés à leur terroir, leur pays, leurs grands hommes.” Hélène Laporte (ID), Strasbourg Revised edition, European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (debate), 17 June 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Smismans, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union,” 129.

<sup>99</sup> Joschka Fischer, “From Confederacy to Federation: Thoughts on the Finality of European Integration,” speech at the Humboldt University, Berlin, May 12, 2000, <https://ec.europa.eu/dorie/fileDownload.do?docId=192161&cardId=192161>.

<sup>100</sup> Tanja A. Börzel, “What Can Federalism Teach Us About the European Union? The German Experience,” (Paper prepared for the Conference „Governing together in the New Europe“, Robinson College, Cambridge, April 12-13, 2003), 1.

The potential reason for a low amount of explicit reference to a federal construction could lie within the generally negative opinion existing around the concept. As much as among scholars of European integration and in the public discourse, federalism is connected to the concept of ‘state building’, which in a European context sounds rather utopistic and threatening. From this perspective, establishing a European ‘superstate’ would mean the end of the sovereign nation-state and national identity. According to Michael Burgess, part of the problem is the use of conventional language and terminology used to describe the European Union. He mentions abuse of words, such as ‘sovereignty’, ‘independence’ and ‘national identity’ in emotive terms where a federal EU is contrasted to the survival of the nation-state.<sup>101</sup> As presented previously, these words constituted the nodal points of the intergovernmental discourse, as described in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory. Thus, the question arises: In contrast to the ‘European Union of Sovereign Nations’ discourse, what is the language used to define the EU and its future destination within the federalist discourse? In the analysed speeches, particularly because of the lack of explicit articulation is why discourse analysis provides an important tool to discover the constitutive aspect of federalist language. However, what a federalist European Union would like in terms of power distribution, the role of the three main European institutions, national parliaments, and Member States’ governments?

For a federal European Union, the European Commission would need to become a central executive power and a truly European government with political oversight of its members by the European Parliament. This would mean that the already established ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ system, the process of the European Parliament electing the Commission President, would become institutionalized. Moreover, the Parliament would gain further legislative powers, making the co-legislation with the Council of the EU as a default decision-making process. The role of national parliaments is seen as an intermediary representation towards the EU level. This, on the one hand, suggests an enhanced role to local and national parliaments as the closest representatives to territorial interests. On the other hand, it implies the supremacy of the European level, where rather functional interest related to specific policy areas should be represented. A truly federal system would also require redistributive powers to be independent

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<sup>101</sup> Michael Burgess, ed. *Federalism and Federation in Western Europe* (London: Routledge, 1986), xii.

of Member States, attributing a centralised tax system and spending capacity to the Commission.<sup>102</sup> The following excerpts show that the discourse in the European Parliament is generally in line with the described federal distribution of power, referring to a strengthened role of the Parliament justified by being a direct representative of European citizens.

“This logic has reached its limits, and today we are on the brink. So yes, 100 times yes, this conference on rebuilding the European Union is more than necessary, but citizens must be directly involved in this work, the debate must leave the institutions to irrigate all of our societies. How to strengthen our European democracy, how to build a common army, how to establish a common tax system?”<sup>103</sup>

Raphaël Glucksmann (S&D) – 15 January 2020

“So we have seen in the euro and in the migration crisis that we always get stuck when integration is done only halfway. So I think the answer that we have to deliver, is that we give the European Union the tools and the competence to actually address the major challenges of our time. Let’s stop letting populists and Eurosceptics dominate the debate on European integration. Let’s start building a stronger and truly united Europe today, and let’s take another step towards a European Federal Republic”.

Daniel Freund, Greens – 15 January 2020

MEPs acknowledge the need to ‘rebuild the European Union,’ suggesting that the current construction has reached ‘the brink’ of its existence, conveying a sense of urgency for action. Interestingly but perhaps not unsurprisingly, the *diagnosis* of the EU’s legitimacy problem as it can be understood from the structure of the text lies within the conceived external reality. When mentioning ‘migration’, the ‘COVID-19 crisis’, ‘unemployment’ and ‘policy challenges’, in nearly all examples, the concept of transitivity can be identified. These events are connected in such a way to the subject, often referred to as ‘we’, that the sentence emphasizes the effect rather than the process or actions that led to it, removing the agent of responsibility.

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<sup>102</sup> Börzel, “What Can Federalism Teach Us About the European Union? The German Experience,” 11-12.

<sup>103</sup> “Cette logique a atteint ses limites et nous sommes aujourd’hui au bord du gouffre. Alors oui, 100 fois oui, cette conférence pour refonder l’Union européenne est plus que nécessaire, mais il faut que les citoyens soient directement impliqués dans ces travaux, il faut que le débat sorte des institutions pour irriguer l’ensemble de nos sociétés. Comment renforcer notre démocratie européenne, comment construire une armée commune, comment établir une fiscalité commune?”



Differences appear when Members *evaluate* the need for changes in how the EU's democratic system is functioning today. As the intergovernmental discourse identifies the problem of insufficient democracy in those advocating for the federalist and neo-functional ideology of an 'ever closer union', the federalist discourse sees the same in 'anti-Europeans', 'Eurosceptics' or 'populists.' The context in which these words are used suggests that these adjectives are only used to the political elite, those who 'dominate the debate on European integration' and not what citizens would want without being exposed to 'populist' narratives and the hegemonic power of those who dominate discourses. This line of argument explicitly refers to the power struggle that lies in political discourse, including the European Parliament, which MEPs aim to ease by giving agency to the 'people' and the 'citizens' through using active language and words with a strong modality such as "More democratic - People decide."<sup>104</sup> In the first example shown above, using the word 'logic' in the presence of others such as a 'common army' and 'common tax system' suggests that the current system of European governance lacks the 'tools and the competence' to effectively respond to current challenges, which are beyond Member States' capacities. As shown by the below articulations, a strong and politicized European Parliament as well as the participation of citizens in democratic processes could provide *solutions* to these challenges.

"... we have to consider how to strengthen the rights of this institution – the European Parliament – for example on the key issue, the question of right of initiative for the European Parliament, like all other parliaments have."

Manfred Weber (EPP), 15 January 2020

"The first change must be in the way of involving citizens in these European processes because Europe was not created for Brussels or for an elite or for a bubble but to serve all citizens."<sup>105</sup>

Dacian Cioloş (Renew), 15 January 2020

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<sup>104</sup> Manfred Weber (EPP), Strasbourg Revised edition, European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (debate), 15 January 2020.

<sup>105</sup> "Les élections européennes ont montré que les citoyens européens croient en l'Europe, mais ils veulent une Europe meilleure, différente, une Europe renouvelée. Le premier changement doit être dans la façon d'associer les citoyens à ces processus européens parce que l'Europe n'a pas été créée pour Bruxelles ou pour une élite ou pour une bulle mais pour servir tous les citoyens."

“...it is really crucial to understand all the European diversities and to include the special perspectives of our citizens coming from all corners of Europe.”

Karlo Ressler (EPP), 15 January 2020

The use of agency also plays a particular importance in *defining the European project* in the federalist discourse. As opposed to the intergovernmental discourse, the word ‘citizens’ has a crucial role in the legitimation strategies of MEPs. Being used in the context of words as ‘election’, ‘governance’ and ‘defining the future’, it suggests a strong political role for citizens in the construction of EU democracy. Moreover, MEPs refer to European citizens as a diverse but united entity, constructing the nodal point of the federalist understanding of the European project. The federalist division of power and legitimacy is emphasized by the reference of ‘diversity’ and the expression of ‘all corners of Europe’ pointing towards Risse’s understanding of the concept of ‘nested identity.’ However, it is important to note that there is a lack of mentioning European values, culture and a shared identity as MEPs almost exclusively focus on *constructing an identity* which is based on a political sense of identification with the European project, allegedly providing its legitimacy. Although the content of the speeches aims at emphasizing the essence of active citizen participation in democracy, particularly through input democracy, CDA helps to discover an elitist articulation. There is strong transitivity in the texts assigning agents to different responsibilities in increasing the EU’s legitimacy. The word ‘we’ refers to parliamentarians who hold the responsibility of bringing forward citizens’ voices, representing their interests and allowing them to participate in democratic processes directly. However, citizens are referred to as ‘them’ and often with a passive form of a verb, suggesting a top-down discourse, contrary to what MEPs explicitly say, depicting the EU as an elitist project and potentially jeopardizing the construction of a shared European identity, which however would be the core element of a federalist democratic European Union.

#### **4.4. The European Union as an International Actor: the globalization discourse**

The emergence of this discourse in the analysed parliamentary debates about the Conference on the Future of Europe is not particularly surprising. The European Union, although it cannot be classified as a state in conventional terms, plays an increasingly relevant role in world politics and the global economy. With the introduction of the EU’s High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the European Union gained a formalised and more

visible form of international representation. Moreover, the European Commission bears the responsibility of negotiating EU trade agreements on behalf of the Member States, which are also used to promote the core values of the European Union, namely peace, liberty, democracy, human rights, equality, and the rule of law. Speaking with the common voice of 27 Member States has important leverage on the international stage with the potential to set the political agenda through, for example, its climate diplomacy, market power and setting standards for political and economic processes.<sup>106</sup>

“While Nigel and the band of lying Brexiteers are driving the UK over the cliff edge, we start a much needed debate on the next steps of European integration, a debate that will lead to a stronger and a more democratic Union and because we think what is needed in a time of climate crisis, of large corporations not paying their taxes, of being squished between a less reliable United States and an ever-stronger China, is not small mindedness, is not national selfishness. We have to unite. We have to cooperate because otherwise we perish, small and alone.”

Daniel Freund (Greens) – 17 June 2020

“In fact, the reality is that, on the international stage, we are mocked by Putin, we are blackmailed by Erdoğan, we are bullied by Trump, and mostly we are ignored by the Chinese Government. That’s the reason why we want to reform Europe; not because we say ‘we are Europeans and everything is going well’. No, it will be a different world tomorrow, dominated by what I call empires, like China, like India, like Russia, like America. That doesn’t mean that we have to become an empire – on the contrary – but we want to defend a Europe in which our children and grandchildren can survive in this new world, which is not the case today.”

Guy Verhofstadt (Renew) – 15 January 2020

The above excerpts from the two parliamentary debates demonstrate that the EU’s legitimacy and democracy problem is ***diagnosed*** as the EU’s limited power on the international stage in comparison to challenges brought by globalization and other global actors. In the second paragraph, the speaker uses passive forms of verbs with a negative connotation, such as ‘blackmail’, ‘bully’ and ‘ignore’, to call for urgent action by using metanarratives which can be found in the discourse of globalization. Although there is a lack of consensus over the meaning of globalization, different groups of authors associate it with, for example, destructive effects

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<sup>106</sup> Morten Egeberg, “The European Commission,” in *European Union Politics*, eds. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th Edition, 2019), 144-146.

on democratic processes as well as financial, economic, and cultural consequences.<sup>107</sup> Although the word ‘globalization’ is not explicitly mentioned, it is implicitly reflected in the above examples of climate change and the tax avoidance of large corporations due to potentially being headquartered in a different country than where their market is. In this context, globalization can be understood as a sensemaking term, a nodal point in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, to which problems of EU legitimacy and democracy are attached.<sup>108</sup>

Moving on to the causes of these challenges and insufficient democracy, both examples use the prevailing European system of values to legitimise their accuse of other states, like the UK, U.S., China, India and Russia, for being a threat to what Europeanness means. The need for change and reform in the EU through CDA’s concept of transitivity is connected to the United Kingdom leaving the European Union and accusing ‘Brexiters’, the Leave campaigners, of “lying’ to the British population about ‘taking back control’ because of ‘national selfishness.’<sup>109</sup> It is important to note that when this speech was made, the UK still has not left the European Union after more than four years of negotiations with the European Union, with a “no-deal scenario” being on the table at the time. The ‘driving the UK over the cliff edge’ metaphor encompasses the uncertainty of the UK possibly having had to leave the EU without a cooperation and trade agreement that would have severely affected the import of goods, fishing, cooperation on security and data-sharing, the supply of medications and the Good Friday Agreement ensuring peace in Northern Ireland.<sup>110</sup>

The reference to a ‘less reliable United States’ indicates growing concerns over Trans-Atlantic relations, especially as the trade war between the EU and the Trump-era United States was seriously deteriorating at the time the speech took place, only a few months before the next presidential elections had been held in the US. Imposing tariffs on several goods, such as steel and aluminium on national security grounds, has been severely retaliated from the EU by imposing tariffs on €2.8 billion (\$3.39 billion) worth of US goods.<sup>111</sup> The reference to the United

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<sup>107</sup> Peer C. Fiss, and Paul M. Hirsch, “The Discourse of Globalization: Framing and Sensemaking of an Emerging Concept,” *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (February 1, 2005): 32-34. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjrs&AN=edsjrs.4145349&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>109</sup> Smismans, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union,” 139.

<sup>110</sup> BBC News, “Brexit: What would no deal mean?,” *BBC News*, December 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-48511379>.

<sup>111</sup> Barbara Moens and Jakob Hanke Vela, “EU keeps its shield up in the US trade war,” *POLITICO*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-us-trade-tariffs-airbus-boeing-valdis-dombrovskis/>.

States is in the context of calling for stronger European cooperation, which can be ascribed to the Europeanist security discourse, according to which the EU should develop its own strategic autonomy or ‘European sovereignty’ as known in popular discourse.<sup>112</sup> The concept, which promotes an independent European security and defence alternative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a way of balancing the US international influence.<sup>113</sup>

Regarding the solutions mentioned to the above-depicted problems, in the first paragraph, the verb ‘will’ asserts the authority of the speaker over the audience, implying as if European integration was the only viable option for a better and stronger EU democracy. This is further understood through the contrast drawn of what would happen if the EU and policymakers would fail to strengthen their cooperation through further integration: “otherwise we perish, small and alone.” Here the word ‘we’ refers to nation-states, which are not as economically and politically influential as a supranational European Union. As an answer to the above-evaluated challenges, the sentence “We have to unite” calls for closer economic and political cooperation within the EU. The second paragraph emphasizes this integrationist discourse, which implies that the solution to growing threats of international powers is to strengthen the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy through combining the EU’s economic soft power with its military means<sup>114</sup> in order to defend the Europe of tomorrow in an increasingly tenacious reality. Using the word ‘empires’ can also be traced back to the discourse of globalization, referring to the increasing number of international transactions, trade leverage and influence over individual rights and culture.

As a response to how MEPs define the European project, it can be concluded that the globalization discourse envisages a democratic European Union as an international actor based on a strong economic and political cooperation, including the areas of foreign, security and defence policy. The discourse of MEPs, however, does not clearly assign the responsibility or competence to any actor in the international arena. The legitimacy of such a construction would

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<sup>112</sup> Mujtaba Rahman, “European sovereignty has lost its biggest champion,” *POLITICO*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-sovereignty-has-lost-its-biggest-champion-emmanuel-macron/>.

<sup>113</sup> Anna Maria Friis and Ana E. Juncos, “The European Union’s Foreign, Security, and Defence Policies,” in *European Union Politics*, eds. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th Edition, 2019), 282.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

be provided by the efficiency benefits of the mentioned policies as well as the identity-building potential of the policy.

In terms of policy change, the future construction of the European Union entails a closer economic and political cooperation, resembling the ‘Doing much more together’ scenario indicated in the White Paper on the Future of Europe, published by the Commission in 2017.<sup>115</sup> Such cooperation would also require the existence of a European ‘we’, representing Europeanness and European values that need to be defended.

Moreover, throughout the discursive articulation of the EU as a global actor, the speakers repeatedly refer to ‘we’ as opposition to Russia, China, the United States, and the UK, creating a sense of ‘us Europeans’ versus ‘them’. Such an articulation points towards the **construction of European identity** among the 27 EU Member States through using active verbs, such as ‘want to reform Europe’, ‘want to defend Europe’, ‘have to unite’ or ‘have to cooperate’ as a response to the economic power, unfair competition, and military threat from the mentioned ‘empires.’ The globalization discourse constructs a European identity that is based on the motion to protect the democratic values, economic interests, fair competition, and peace on which the idea of the European project is based on. Such social structure resembles the ‘nested identity’ concept of Risse with a European identity being at the external circle, the one that protects the future of Europeans from the rest of the world, which attributes legitimacy to its existence.

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<sup>115</sup> European Commission, “White Paper on the Future of Europe,” accessed August 15, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/white\\_paper\\_on\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_europe\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf).

## 5. Conclusions

The 'EU in crisis' narrative has profoundly dominated the public and academic discourse over the past few years. Ongoing commitments of the European elite to rebuilding the construction of the EU and renewing its democratic functioning suggest an opening space for a field of political contestation on the purpose and the future of European integration, introducing the possibility for positive change. Within the context of the dialogue lead by European Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen on strengthening European Union (EU) democracy, this dissertation investigated the role of language in the construction of a democratic EU. The European Parliament (EP), as the only directly elected institution representing the voice of European citizens was therefore the subject of the inquiry.

To investigate how Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) understand and define solutions for the EU's democratic deficit problem, and how these discourses potentially influence the future of the European project, two overarching research questions were posed. The first overarching research question sought to analyse *how MEPs define the European project in light of the EU's alleged 'democratic deficit' problem*. To thoroughly answer this problem-driven question, three additional operational questions were introduced. Firstly, to investigate how MEPs *diagnose* the democracy problem, secondly, to gain insights on how they define its *causes* and thirdly, to provide *solutions* to fixing the problem and pointing towards a future European construction. Moreover, applying a social constructivist tradition, the second overarching research question sought to investigate *how these potentially impact the construction of different forms of (European) identity?* The carefully selected data corpus through which these questions were answered consists of 51 speeches made by 33 MEPs during two parliamentary debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe throughout 2020. Aware that this corpus only represents a fraction of the total number of debates held by MEPs on a weekly to daily basis (and therefore can never be entirely representative of the entire EP), it was decided to focus on these debates in particular since they specifically relate to the EU's democratic deficit problem and include proposed solutions.

Based on social constructivist premises that structures and agents mutually construct and reproduce social reality through their daily practices, this dissertation is built on the assumptions of discourse theory that language does not simply describe reality but contribute to the

construction of reality itself. Namely, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory was used, which claims that there is an ongoing struggle to fix the meaning of certain aspects of reality. The chosen methodology, Critical Discourse Analysis helped to discover power relations in society as well as supported the interpretation of the strategies used to legitimise discourses.

Based on the qualitative two-step thematic and linguistic analysis of the data, three discourses were identified, each providing distinctive answers to the two the overarching research questions mentioned above: (1) an intergovernmentalist discourse, (2) a federalist discourse, and (3) a globalisation discourse.

Overall, it can be concluded that all three discourses are based on the common acknowledgment of MEPs that the current construction of the EU is no longer able to respond to the various external and internal challenges, which contribute to its democratic legitimacy problem. The underlying causes and proposed solutions by each of these three discourses for rebuilding the European construction however point towards largely different visions of what constitutes a more democratic EU.

The **intergovernmental discourse** envisions a democratic European project as a union of sovereign nation states. Such discourse is based on an uncontested understanding of state, nation and sovereignty which are conveyed through strong emotive words like 'freedom', 'national interest' and 'hope.' The frequent use of the word 'European nations' placed into the subject position when democracy in the EU is mentioned simultaneously limits the existence of a common European identity. However, the lack of contestation of the powers of the European Parliament suggests a certain acceptance of the EU's current construction against a purely intergovernmental discourse, which would limit parliamentary representation solely to the national level.

The **federalist discourse** places legitimacy on the active democratic participation of European citizens. However, the language used to construct such a bottom-up model emphasises the distinction between 'we' (referring to parliamentarians and political elite leading European integration) and 'them' (referring to citizens) being described through primarily passive language, contradicting the purpose of the process. Moreover, the language used suggests the construction of a rather political European identity with the lack of articulation of a cultural and



value-based sense of identification which, however, would be essential for the functioning of a federalist European Union.

The **globalisation discourse** sees the democratisation of the EU in its strengthened international role and is constructed around a sense of ‘Europeanness’. This gains its meaning through contrasting the European ‘we’ to ‘others’ like China or the United States with growing political and economic influence and threat. Such articulation opens possibilities for a European identity formation. However, the discourse fails to assign the actors responsible to provide the cost-benefit based output legitimacy of further political integration, thus, to sufficiently legitimise the model.

These results confirm that the choice of language matters, especially in a democratically relevant context as the European Parliament. Talking in certain ways about the EU provides pre-emptive ways of future integration in the “trap” of the classical debate of ‘more or less Europe’, failing to establish a common ground for legitimacy.<sup>116</sup>

Thus, the critical question arises: Can we make the EU more democratic without a shared understanding on how to “name the beast”? In future research, one could extend the analysis to the level of civil society and citizens to gain a better understanding on the role of different forms of public communication, such as social media or participatory exercises like Citizen’s Agoras (thematic fora of citizen representatives chosen randomly in line with proportionality and representativeness criteria) in the formation of public discourses on the EU. Moreover, a comparative analysis of discourses of the EP with other European institutions on EU democracy would provide a better diagnosis of how strategic communication within and outside the EU could enable the democratic development of the EU in the future. Until then, we will be repeating the same debates.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

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