

DOI: 10.24193/OJMNE.2024.44.04

DID THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE GO LOCAL? EVIDENCE FROM POLAND

Paweł BĄCAL¹, MA
University of Warsaw
p.bacal@student.uw.edu.pl

Abstract: *The aim of the paper is to analyse the involvement of the local and regional authorities within the Conference on the Future of Europe. The former, being closer to the citizens, could play important role in reaching “every corner of the European Union” and helping the citizens to articulate their ideas about the European integration. Therefore, the activity of the subnational level could contribute to the final success of the Conference (or failure – in case of lack of any actions). The analysis is based on the author’s own empirical study conducted among the Polish territorial self-government units after the closure of the Conference. The local and regional authorities were asked if they informed the citizens about the Conference, organised events regarding this enterprise or took part in the events organised by other entities. The results show very low level of the activity, even among the territorial self-government units that are present at the European level. The conclusions regard both to the Polish circumstances as well as to the general performance of the Conference. In the first case, they unveil the unwritten practice among the Polish territorial self-government units on their involvement in the European affairs. Regarding the second point, the results indicate that the Conference did not manage to exceed the “European bubble”.*

Keywords: Conference on the future of Europe, local and regional authorities, subnational level, institutional engagement, Poland.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been often accused of creating the state of “democratic deficit”. In order to be “cleared of charges”, the EU institutions – notably the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP) – have been coming up with several ideas on how to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU. The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE or Conference) was the latest attempt in that matter – and it has differed from

¹ The author would like to thank prof. Piotr Tosiek, the participants of the UACES Graduate Forum 2023 as well as two anonymous reviewers for their helpful remarks.

the previous enterprises, both in regard to scale and the openness. The Conference has tried to reach the citizens through as many channels as possible. The latter had the chance to enter the discussion on the future of Europe through the Citizens' Panels or the Multilingual Digital Platform. However, this was not the only way since in its quest to get closer to the people, the EU has used the help of the ones that are indeed close – the local and regional authorities. They (among other entities, such as NGOs or social partners) were invited to take part in the CoFoE and pass further the ideas of the citizens gathered during the meetings organised on the subnational level. The question is if they have accepted this invite.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the involvement of the local and regional authorities in the Conference. The subnational level is in a better position than the European one in terms of engaging the citizens because of the smaller size and number of the members of the community. Hence, the activity within the CoFoE of the local and regional authorities could be a significant factor contributing to the final success (or failure) of the former. Although it is only one of the channels that was used to “reach every corner of the EU”, it can be an indicator of the general performance of the Conference.

There are not so many studies on the Conference on the Future of Europe yet, mainly due to the short period of time that has passed since CoFoE's closing event. Nevertheless, one can find some first studies (Markowicz, Tosiek 2023; Oleart 2023; Crum 2023), including these that focus on the subnational level's involvement in this enterprise (Kölling 2022; Sautter, Reuchamps 2022; Antal 2022; see also Petzold 2022). For instance, studies from Germany analyse the activity of the *Länder* (Abels 2022; Peters, Ziegenbalg 2022). What we can find there, however, is a sole listing of the actions – but not the answer to the question of the scale of local and regional authorities' involvement. From this perspective, although this paper presents the data for only one member state, it will be the first one to assess the extent to which the subnational level took part in the CoFoE, as well as to look for reasons for that level of activity.

The findings are based on the author's own empirical study conducted among the Polish territorial self-government units (TSGUs) after the closure of the Conference. The analysis tries to confirm the hypothesis stating that the greatest determinant of the TSGU's activity within the CoFoE is the “institutional engagement” at the EU level. The “institutional engagement” is understood in the formal terms as: (1) being represented in the CoR in a form of member or

alternate; (2) having Regional Office in Brussels or (3) being represented in the Conference Plenary.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 introduces the theoretical framework, while section 3 is devoted to the CoFoE and the subnational level's involvement in this enterprise. The methodology and the results of the empirical study are presented in section 4. The analysis of the results is included in section 5. Finally, section 6 contains conclusive remarks.

2. Theoretical framework

In order to achieve the aforementioned goal of the study, this research draws on two theoretical frameworks: the "Europe with the Regions" concept and the Sociological Institutionalism (hereinafter also SI). The former serves to acknowledge that the CoFoE was quite a unique possibility of involvement at the European level for the subnational authorities, compared to the previous opportunities. In turn, using the SI framework allows one to demonstrate that this current involvement was shaped by the preexisting rules of subnational authorities' activity at the European level.

The "Europe with the Regions" may be seen as emerging from a (more popular) concept of "Europe of the Regions" (Schakel 2020, p. 772). In contrast to the latter, "Europe with the Regions" has a strictly scholarly (and not political) as well as more modest character. Instead of dreaming of the regions replacing the nation-states as the main actor of the European integration, it perceives the EU as a multi-level polity and seeks to analyse the channels of subnational level's involvement at the European level, like the Committee of the Regions (hereinafter CoR) or the Regional Offices in Brussels (Marks, Hooghe 1996; Panara 2019; Baçal 2022a). That leads us to two conclusions. Firstly, "Europe with the Regions" can be associated with the concept of multi-level governance (Schakel 2020). Secondly, the literature has hitherto focused on the representative aspect of regions' activity – that is on the ways of influencing the European decision-making process. That was seen as significant especially since approximately 60-80% of the European legislation impacts the regional and local level (Moore 2008, p. 518-519). However, what is generally missing is the participatory aspect, i.e. the ways the subnational authorities could involve the citizens in their activities at the European level (Tatham 2018, p. 676-677; see also Panara, Varney 2017 and Baçal 2022b, p. 68-61). This should not be ignored

since the main argument of the regions' European activity was that this will bring Europe "closer to the people". From this point of view, the Conference on the Future of Europe could be seen as a unique enterprise because its main goal (also in case of the subnational level) was to engage citizens. If we combine this with the CoFoE's Final Report (which will be analysed later) and the newly established European Commission's programme "Building Europe with Local Councillors" (European Union 2022), we might see the emergence of the new model of subnational level's activity at the European level. This model, in contrast to the "Europe with the Regions", focuses on the participatory aspect, and is based on the opportunities of local and regional authorities' activity at the European level that explicitly demand from them to involve the citizens. We may call this model "Europe through the Regions".

Sociological institutionalism in the EU studies has not been firmly associated with the analysis of the institutions of the subnational level. The scholars have focused mainly on the EU institutions, such as the EC or EP (Reh et al., 2013). However, there is no reason why this approach cannot be used to the analysis of the subnational level's functioning. Sociological institutionalism states that the institutional decisions are limited by the social structure and cultural environment (Weiner 2006, p. 38-39). As March and Olsen (cited in Börzel and Risse 2003, p. 66) write, in light of the SI, the institutions are driven by the "logic of appropriateness". It means that they do not always look for the most effective option but rather prefer to do what is socially expected from them (Risse 2019). The relation between the institutions and social structure goes in two directions. The structure can influence the functioning of the institutions, but the latter can also contribute to impact the latter (Weiner 2006, p. 38-39). The interactions between institutions and other entities (*inter alia* other institutions) shape the mutual behaviour and can lead influence the way one perceives themselves. In other words, the institutions can be subjects of socialisation (Börzel and Risse 2003, p. 66-67). Among the effects of this process, the SI has recognised the situation, in which the actors' actions – through frequent interactions – start to show more and more similarities (such result has been named "institutional isomorphism"). Secondly, to be seen as the "good members of the society", the institutions can internalise some rules that are widely acceptable in such society. The latter can be defined in more narrow sense, limited to the institutions. The interactions between them can lead to the establishment of some norms and/or practices that, although unwritten, will be obeyed (Jenson

and Mérand 2010). At least until the new rule will be recognised as binding for the group. The norms and practices can concern every aspect of the institutions' functioning as well as can be limited to the specific area of their activity.

3. The CoFoE and the involvement of the subnational level

The CoFoE was not the first attempt of the EU institutions to involve the citizens in the decision-making process – it has been preceded by *inter alia* Citizens' Dialogues. However, the scale of the Conference, its orientation on the strategic issues as well as its clear time schedule entitle to say that it was the unprecedented event in the history of the EU. As it was stated in the Joint Declaration on the Future of Europe, signed by the Presidents of the Council, EC and EP: 'the Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union. It will give citizens a greater role in shaping the Union's future policies and ambitions' (Official Journal of the European Union 2021a).

The Conference began on the 9th May 2021 and ended exactly one year later. It was based on three main pillars. The first one was the European Citizens' Panels, consisting of randomly selected EU citizens, tasked with putting forward recommendations that could be later discussed by the Conference Plenary. The European Citizen's Panels were accompanied by the National Citizens' Panels, organised in the 6 member states. The second pillar was the Multilingual Digital Platform. It gave the possibility to participate in the CoFoE in two ways: (1) by opening or joining the discussion on one of the given topics (climate, democracy etc.) as well as (2) by organizing the local event and uploading gathered recommendations. The final pillar was the Conference Plenary – the body consisting of the politicians, social partners and citizens. It worked on the proposals from the Citizens' Panels and the Platform and shaped them in a form presented in the Final Report.

In the formal terms, the Final Report was the main result of the CoFoE. Therefore, it was up to the EU institutions what to do with the citizens' proposals. Lack of the reaction would undermine the credibility of any future citizen-oriented initiatives. The EP was the most eager to strengthen the importance of the Conference by calling for the results to be basis for the Treaty

change (European Parliament 2022). The EC and the Council have chosen more of a technical approach, presenting reports on the particular citizens' proposals (Council 2022; European Commission 2022a). The main findings of these documents are that the EU already has introduced (or plans to do it) most of the measures. Moreover, in the 2022 State of the Union Address, Ursula von der Leyen has stated that the EC will include the proposals from the CoFoE in work the programme for the forthcoming years as well as it will make use of the Citizens Panels formula (European Commission 2022b). The Conference was also addressed by the European Council that in its June 2022 summit conclusions devoted 4 sentences to the CoFoE, 'taking note of the proposals' as well as instructing the Council, EC and EP to 'ensure an effective follow-up' (European Council 2022). The different reactions on the CoFoE has once again proved the difference between the intergovernmental and supranational institutions in regard to the citizens' involvement.

The CoFoE was the enterprise of three EU institutions – the Council, EC, and the EP. However, it does not mean that others could not be involved. The open structure of the Conference provided a place for several actors, not only those formally represented in the Plenary (such as national parliaments), but also political groups, for instance. As the CoFoE was an attempt to "bring Europe closer to the citizens", it had reserved a room for those institutions that are considered to be the closest to the people – namely the local and regional authorities.

Starting with the formal side, the subnational level was represented in the Conference Plenary. There were 12 representatives of the democratically elected local and regional authorities – 6 per each level. Moreover, one should also count the 18 representatives of the CoR. It stems from the fact that in order to be a member of this EU's advisory body, one has to hold a democratic mandate on the local or regional level (cf. Baçal 2022b). Therefore, the total number of the subnational level's representatives was 30. However, they cannot be classified as the most influential members of the Plenary. As it was stated in the Final Report, and in accordance with the Rules of Procedure, the 49 proposals were formulated on the consensual basis, but only between the Council, EC, EP, and national parliaments. Other members – citizens' side, subnational level, social partners etc. – "only" gave their support at the end of the procedure (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 35).

The Multilingual Digital Platform was another involvement opportunity for the subnational level. As the Platform Final Report states, the local and regional authorities were among the actors that had organised some events and later uploaded the results of the consultations (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022b, p. 18). The results of the empirical research will shade some light on the scale of activity in that matter.

The subnational level has been also mentioned in the documents establishing the framework of the CoFoE. The Joint Declaration states that ‘under the umbrella of the Conference and in full respect of the principles set out in this Joint Declaration, we will organise events in partnership with civil society and stakeholders at European, national, regional, and local level, with national and regional Parliaments, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, social partners, and academia. Their involvement will ensure that the Conference goes far beyond Europe’s capital cities and reaches every corner of the Union’ (Official Journal of the European Union 2021). The Rules of Procedure formulates similar message and ads – in relation to the Platform – that it ‘is open directly for citizens, civil society, social partners, and other stakeholders, as well as public authorities at European, national, regional and local level, as long as they subscribe to and respect the Conference Charter’ (Conference on the Future of Europe 2021).

Apart from taking part in the CoFoE Plenary and organising events for the citizens, one should mention two additional points regarding the activity of the subnational level. The first one is the involvement in organisation of the European Citizens’ Panels, that were organised in other places than Strasbourg (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 15). Secondly, the regions gathered in the initiative “Regions for EU Recovery” have issued a letter to the Executive Board right before the start of the Conference. In an opinion of the signatories, ‘the framework for the CoFoE should ensure that Regions have the opportunity to directly contribute to all the fora of the conference. Moreover, we suggest that the CoFoE includes a plenary session designated to discuss the role of regions and multi-level governance’ (Government of Catalonia 2021).

The subnational level can also be found in the proposals formulated in the Final Report. The Report’s authors underline that the involvement of the local and regional authorities is needed to improve the efficiency of the EU’s actions in areas like climate or economy

(Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 45, 54). However, most ideas concern democracy topic. On the one side, the EU should help the local and regional authorities to support the civic engagement (for instance ‘provide enhanced structural support, financial and otherwise, for civil society, especially for youth civil society and support local authorities in setting up local youth councils’ [Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 79]). On the other hand, the EU should make use of the local and regional authorities’ help to communicate with the citizens more effectively and involve them in the decision-making process (‘include organised civil society and regional and local authorities and existing structures such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the CoR in the citizens’ participation process’ [Conference on the Future of Europe, 2022a]). The main proposal in that regard seems to be to ‘create a system of local EU Councillors, as a way to reduce the distance between the EU institutions and European citizens’ (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a).

Separate attention has to be given to the CoR. As it has stated in its report summarising the activity within the CoFoE: ‘since the end of 2020, the CoR has held – in addition to its regular debates during plenary sessions and commission meetings – a variety of events in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, with the double objective of informing citizens and local politicians and developing its position regarding the future of Europe. In so doing, the CoR has worked together with local and regional administrations, associations representing local and regional interests, and EU institutions’ (Committee of the Regions 2022a, p. 2). The CoR’s actions can be divided into three main categories.

The first one contains the events organised by the EU’s advisory body. Enterprises regularly organised by the CoR – such as “EU Regions Week” and “Young Elected Politicians programme” – have been devoted to the topic of the Conference. Apart from that, the CoR has also teamed up with German NGO Bertelsmann Stiftung to run a project “Close up Europe” (Committee of the Regions, Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022). The project consisted of 23 cooperation projects by total number of 67 regions and cities that have conducted consultations with the citizens. *Circa* 2000 people have participated in these events and have formulated more than 400 proposals on the future of Europe. The ideas have been presented in the summary report of the project. One of the main findings of the project is that “municipalities, cities and regions are

interested in developing modern and systematic citizen participation in order to influence local level politics through to the EU level” (*Ibidem*, p. 56).

Secondly, the CoR has adopted 4 resolutions, expressing its stance on the CoFoE. In the first one, from 2020, the EU’s advisory body has welcomed the idea of the Conference and called for the decentralised approach with aim to reach every area of the EU, not only the capital cities (Official Journal of the European Union 2020). On its own behalf, the CoR has committed to helping the local and regional authorities with organising the events for the citizens within the scope of the CoFoE. The second resolution was adopted in May 2021 (Official Journal of the European Union 2021). Apart from welcoming the CoFoE once again (‘[the CoR] considers the Conference to be an opportunity to bring Europe closer to its citizens and to strengthen their sense of ownership in the European project’), the CoR has also highlighted its own initiatives aiming at involving the citizens in the decision-making process. At the beginning of 2022, the third resolution was adopted (Official Journal of the European Union 2022a). The CoR has underlined the role of the local and regional authorities in supporting the civic engagement’s development (Petzold 2022, p. 68). Based on that, the CoR (as the representative of these authorities) has called for strengthening of its own position – by being given the institution status as well as obliging the Council, EC and EP to justify their decisions on not taking the CoR’s opinions into account. The EU’s advisory body adopted its fourth resolution after the closure of the Conference (Committee of the Regions 2022a). In this document, the CoR has *inter alia*: (1) expressed a support for the EP’s call to start the treaty revision procedure; (2) called for the place for the local and regional authorities at the future Convention deciding on the treaty change; (3) supported the idea that the national and regional parliaments should be able to suggest the legislative initiatives at the EU level in the future. Regarding other activities in that category, in 2021 the CoR has set up the High-Level Group on European Democracy. The group was chaired by the former president of the European Council, Herman von Rompuy. In the final report, the High-Level Group has called for staying within the current framework of the Treaties and trying to make use of its untapped potential (Committee of the Regions 2022c: 4). The report also suggests strengthening of the CoR’s position, for instance concerning the consultation procedure or the subsidiarity principle.

The third component of the CoR's activity within the CoFoE was the presence in the Conference Plenary. As it was mentioned, the CoR had 18 representatives there. In that matter, the Report on the CoR's actions related to the CoFoE has stated that 'the CoR delegation's objective at the Conference's plenary sessions is to reach out to the other 420 delegates to strengthen the role of local and regional authorities in the democratic functioning of the European Union and to promote the territorial dimension of EU policies' (Committee of the Regions 2022a, p. 2). It is worth noting as well that the CoR (along with the Economic and Social Committee) has been granted a role of an observer to the Executive Board (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 7).

The CoR has also been the subject of attention during the Citizens' Panels and the Conference Plenary. In the CoFoE Final Report, one can find a proposal to 'reform the Committee of Regions to encompass adequate channels of dialogue for regions as well as cities and municipalities, giving it an enhanced role in the institutional architecture, if matters with a territorial impact are concerned' (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 84).

To sum up the activity of the subnational level and its representatives within the Conference, two main remarks can be made. First of all, the local and regional authorities as well as the CoR (as the formers' representative) have taken some action in the matter of the CoFoE. The results of the empirical study will show how big was the scale of this activity and what were its determinants. Secondly, this activity has apparently not gone unnoticed since one can find some ideas about the future of the subnational level's functioning in the EU among the 49 proposals outlined in the Final Report that were put forward to be implemented.

4. Methodology and the results of the empirical study

The paper is based on empirical study that was conducted among the Polish TSGUs. It started at the end of July and ended at the beginning of September 2022. The research has had a quantitative form – using the right to access to the public information, the author has sent to the selected TSGUs the following questions:

1. Have the authorities of the TSGU informed its citizens about the CoFoE (opening, duration, closing)? If so – in what way?

2. Have the authorities of the TSGU organised any events within the CoFoE? If so – what was the topic of the event?
3. Have the authorities of the TSGU taken part in the CoFoE-related events organised by other entities? If so – were the citizens informed about that?

Concerning the TSGUs selected to take part in the study, they can be divided into three categories. The first one consists of the TSGUs that are institutionally engaged at the EU level. As it was mentioned, by “institutional engagement” concerns the CoR, Regional Offices in Brussels or the Conference Plenary. In fact, this category could be reduced only to the CoR, as the TSGUs that have the Regional Offices or were represented in the Conference Plenary, are also represented in the CoR. The second category is connected to the structure of the Regional Offices in Poland. On the total number of 16 Offices, 15 is run by the voivodeships². The remaining one (Pomorskie Regional Office) has different form as it is an enterprise of the association of the TSGUs, “Pomorskie in the EU”. On the 135 TSGUs being in the Pomorskie Region, 25 of them are members of this association. Therefore, the aim of selecting this category is to see if being the member of association active at the EU level leads to the greater involvement in the CoFoE. After receiving the first part of the results, it was decided to extend the study also to the capital cities of the voivodeships to see if the size of the TSGU has determined in any way its activity within the CoFoE. Total number of the study population is 182 TSGUs. Out of those, 179 have given the requested information, which gives the response rate of 98%. The division into the categories was made as follows: 36 TSGUs in the first category (35 have responded)³, 135 TSGUs in the second one (133 have responded) and 18 TSGUs in the third one (18 have responded)⁴. Regarding the type of the TSGUs, the study was conducted among 16 voivodeships, 21 counties and 142 municipalities (out of those 80 were rural municipalities, 19 were urban-rural municipalities and 43 were urban ones).

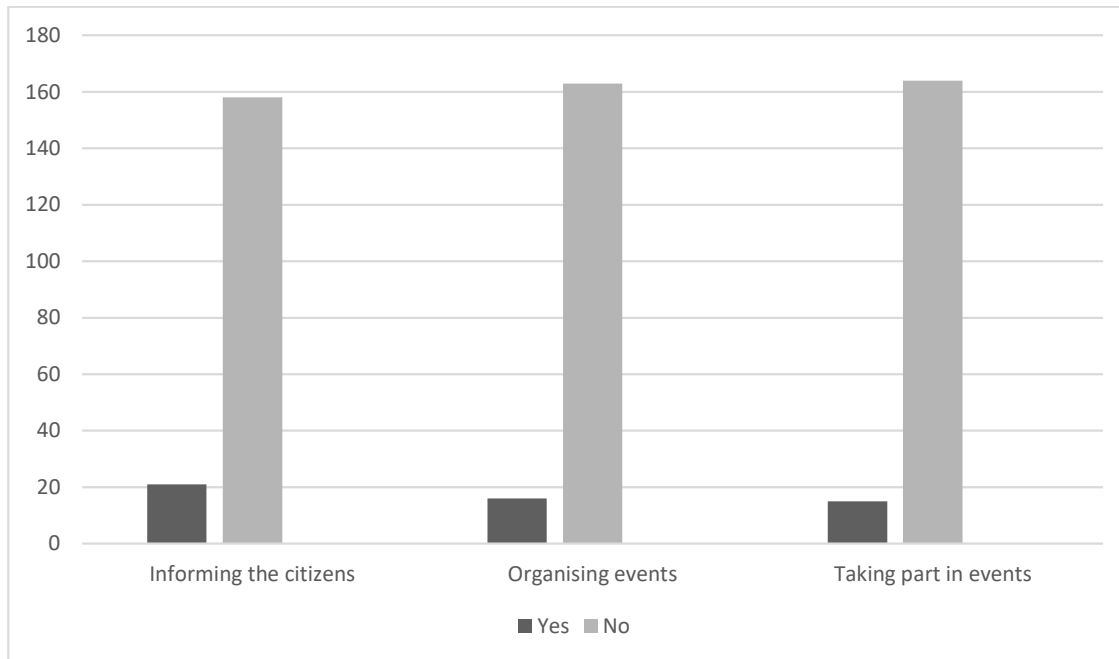
² “Voivodeship” is a Polish name for region.

³ This number is lower than the combined number of CoR’s members and alternates from Poland (42) because some TSGUs have more than one representative.

⁴ As some TSGUs belong to more than one category the sum of the three categories is bigger than the study population. Moreover, although in Poland there are 16 voivodeships, there are 18 capital cities as 2 voivodeships have 2 capital cities.

The empirical study attempts to resolve the question of local and regional authorities' involvement in the CoFoE. Before presenting the results in each category, it may be worth looking at the general overview. The results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Activity within the CoFoE of the Polish TSGUs.

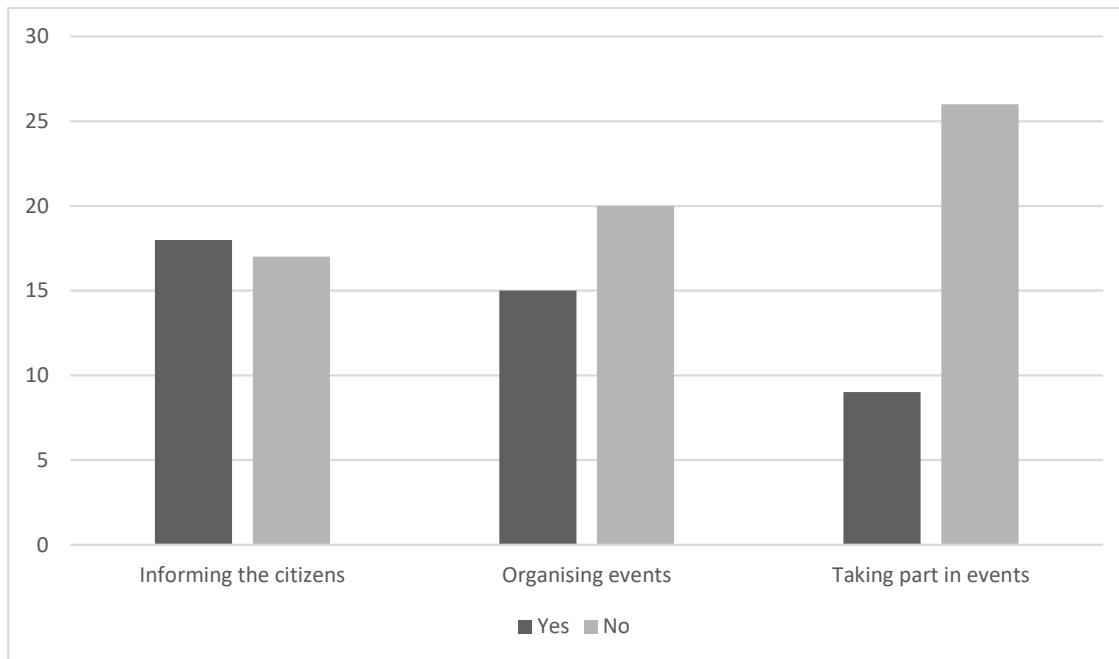


Source: author's own research.

Total number of the TSGUs that have undertaken at least one of the measures is 26. That leaves us with 153 TSGUs with no activity within the CoFoE – 85% of the study population. Having in mind that the goal of the Conference was to “reach every corner of the EU”, it has to be said that it did not happen. The presentation of the results divided into categories will attempt to explain the factors that determined the TSGUs' activity in that matter.

Concerning the first category, one could assume that being “institutionally engaged” at the EU level gives not only better access to the information about the CoFoE, but also more opportunities to convert the citizens' proposals into legislative measures. Moreover, as the CoR's strategy on the Conference was to help its members organise some events, the TSGUs have had more encouragement to get involved. Figure 2 shows if these assumptions are justified.

Figure 2. Activity within the CoFoE of the Polish TSGUs “institutionally engaged” at the EU level.



Source: author’s own research.

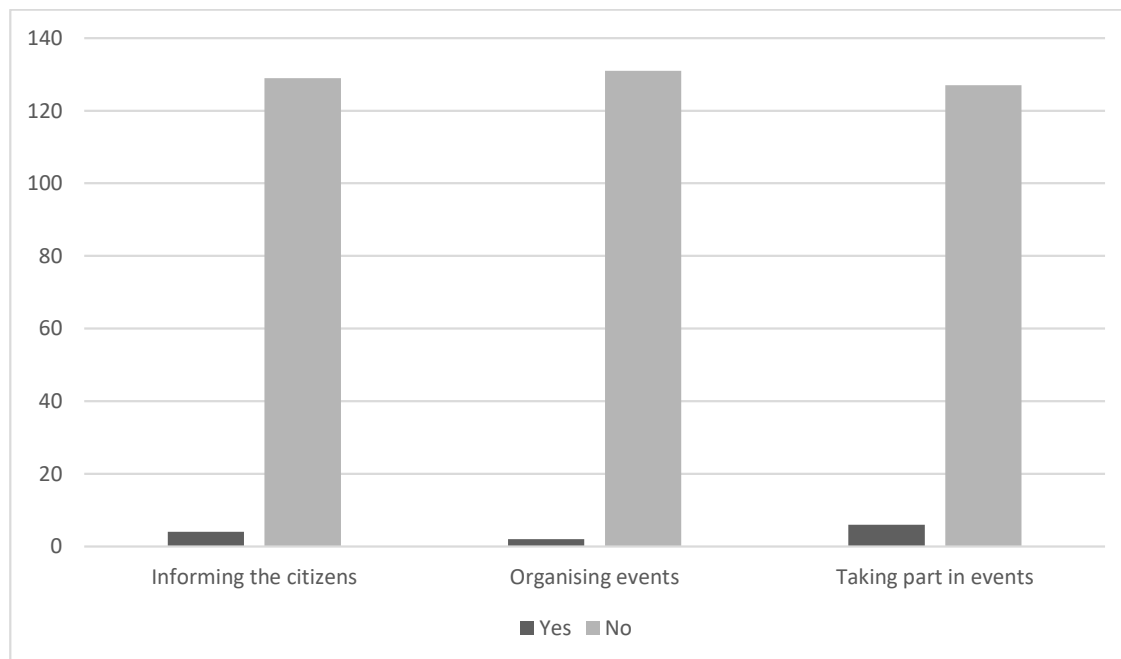
The results may lead to two different conclusions. On the one hand, the percentage of TSGUs’ activity within CoFoE within this category is much higher than on Figure 1. On the other, even among the “institutionally engaged” TSGUs the number of the active ones is bigger than the inactive ones only in one category – informing the citizens (which is the simplest task to do out of these three measures). Out of 35 TSGUs, 16 did not do anything regarding the Conference. Hence, it cannot be stated that being involved at the EU level automatically leads to undertaking some CoFoE-related measures. To throw more light on these results, further unpacking shall be helpful. As it was mentioned, this category consists of the CoR’s members and alternates, TSGUs having Regional Offices in Brussels and CoFoE Plenary members. The latter two are also members or alternates of the CoR so the general results match the results for this EU’s advisory body. When it comes to the TSGUs with the Regional Offices, 14 (out of 15⁵) have informed the citizens about the Conference, 12 have organised some events and 6 have taken part in events organised by other entities. There is only one TSGU with no activity. As one

⁵ Regional Offices run by the voivodeships.

can see, the percentage of TSGUs active within the CoFoE got higher, especially concerning the first two actions. It gets even higher in case of the Conference Plenary members. Three Polish TSGUs have participated in the plenary, one as representative of democratically elected local authorities and two as the representatives of the CoR. Two of them have informed the citizens about the CoFoE and all of them both organised the events and took part in the other's events. There were no TSGUs that have undertaken neither of the measures.

The second category – concerning the TSGUs of the Pomorskie Region - will allow us to test the “institutional engagement at the EU level” variable. Although its meaning stays the same, it has to be remembered that the Regional Office is run not by a single TSGU, but by the association of the TSGUs. Hence, the connection between single TSGU and the EU is somewhat looser than in the previous case.

Figure 3. Activity within the CoFoE of the TSGUs from the Pomorskie Region.



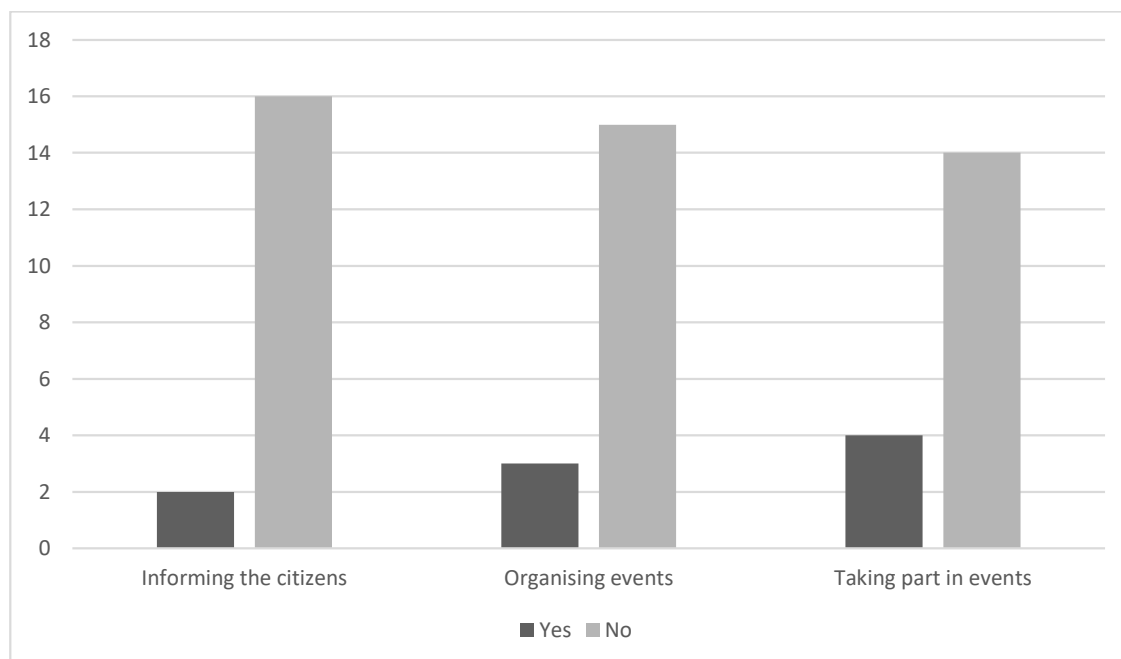
Source: author's own research.

The results presented above include both the TSGUs that are members of the association responsible for running the Regional Office in Brussels as well as those who are not members of this association. On the 133 TSGUs, there are 10 that have undertaken at least one of the actions.

It means that 92% did not do anything. Focusing on the “institutional engagement” at the EU level, the association running the Regional Office contains 25 TSGUs. Out of them, 3 have informed the citizens about the CoFoE, 2 have organised events and 4 have taken part in events organised by the others. There are 7 TSGUs with at least one activity. When it comes to the not-institutionally engaged TSGUs (n=108), 1 has informed the citizens, none have organised events and 2 have taken part in the other’s events. Overall, there are 3 TSGUs that have undertaken at least one of the measures. These results do not allow to state that the being involved in the EU affairs (in this case – in a form of the Regional Office) does stimulate the activity within the CoFoE. Number of the active TSGUs is admittedly higher in the “institutionally engaged” category, but just by a couple. No breakthrough has been noticed.

The third category enables to take a more sociological point of view. Since it concerns the capital cities of the voivodeships (notably the biggest cities in the state), it will be an opportunity to prove if the size of the TSGU determines the activity within the CoFoE. If it does, it would indicate that in order to get involved in the Conference, one would need to have sufficient resources (financial, information) – “European capital” of some sort.

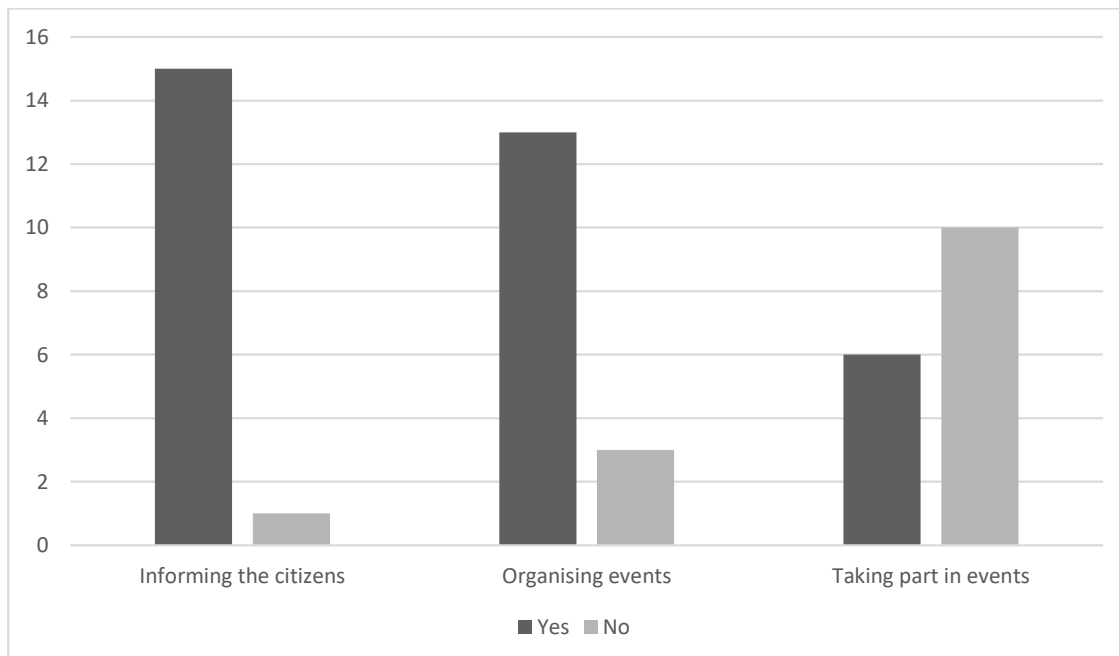
Figure 4. Activity within the CoFoE of the capital cities of Polish voivodeships.



Source: author's own research.

On the 18 cities, there are 4 with at least one activity. These combined results do not allow to prove the assumption regarding the size of the TSGU. To get the full picture, this paragraph will also contain the presentation of the results from the other types of TSGU. Starting with the rural municipalities, 1 of 80 has informed the citizens about the CoFoE and there was no activity regarding organisation of events or taking part in events organised by other entities. Hence, there was 1 TSGU with at least one activity. Urban-rural municipalities (n=19) have not taken any measures in any of the categories. Out of 43 urban municipalities, 3 have informed the citizens, 3 have organised events as well as 6 have taken part in the other's events – 7 TSGUs undertaking at least one measure. When it comes to counties (n=21), 2 have informed the citizens, none have organised the events and 3 have attended the other's events (5 TSGUs with at least one action). Compared to every other type of the TSGUs, the activity of voivodeships looks different. On the 16 voivodeships, 15 have taken at least one action. Detailed results for voivodeships are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Activity within the CoFoE of the Polish voivodeships.



Source: author's own research.

To complete the picture, it is worth taking a look at the types of the activity that has been undertaken by the TSGUs within the CoFoE. Regarding providing information about the Conference to the citizens, it was mostly done by publishing information on the websites of the TSGU. The events concerned mostly the agricultural policy of the EU, EU's support for small and medium entrepreneurs, but also youth policy. There were also some events devoted strictly to local matters. The authorities of the TSGUs have taken part in the events organised by the other TSGUs, Europe Direct Information Centres as well as NGOs. Some decision-makers have taken part in the international events – for instance, one TSGU has taken part in the project of the CoR and the Bertelsmann Stiftung that was mentioned earlier. When it comes to the TSGUs with no activity, a number of them have tried to explain this fact by stating that they were not among the organisers of the CoFoE, or they did not get any information about it. Finally, in a few cases the author had to provide to the information about the CoFoE to the TSGU as its authorities did not know to what conference the author's questions relate.

5. Analysis of the results

There are two major conclusions that can be drawn up from these results. The first one concerns the hypothesis stating that the greatest determinant of the TSGU's activity within the CoFoE is the “institutional engagement” at the EU level. This engagement is understood in the formal terms since in regard to the CoR, Regional Offices in Brussels and Conference Plenary. At first sight, it seems that the hypothesis has been confirmed. The activity of the “institutionally engaged” TSGUs is the most visible, also when compared to the “size of the TSGU” variable. Moreover, that is also the case in the results of the TSGUs from Pomorskie Region (Figure 2) – although the difference is not that detectable. However, if one eliminates the Regional Offices from the “institutional engagement” category, the results change significantly. In this scenario, there are (on the total number of 20) 4 TSGUs that have informed the citizens about the CoFoE, 3 that have organised the events and 3 that have taken part in events organised by other entities. Overall, there are 5 TSGUs with activity in at least one category. Therefore, the activity of the “institutionally engaged” TSGUs is based on the TSGUs with Regional Offices in Brussels.

This point of view could lead to the conclusion that the original hypothesis should be reformulated to look more like this: the greatest determinant of the TSGU's activity within the CoFoE is the "institutional engagement" at the EU level in the form of a Regional Office in Brussels. However, before declaring success, one should consider two additional facts. First of all, the activity focused on involving the citizens in the EU decision-making process just does not comply with the role of the Regional Offices. Their goal is to represent the interests of the TSGU. Moreover, the nature of the interests that the Regional Offices should secure is primarily economic. The Offices undertake the measures to get the EU funds for their TSGU or lobby for adopting the law that would be beneficial from the TSGU's perspective. Such activity leaves little room for the citizens' involvement. The only thing that is in favour of the reformulated hypothesis is better access to the information about the ongoing EU activity. However, the members of the CoR have the same (or even better) access to such information. But in their case, it does not lead to greater activity within the CoFoE.

The second factor that should be considered is the fact that in 15 out of 16 cases the Regional Offices are run by voivodeships. And in this remaining one, the voivodeship is involved as well. Hence, the attention should be turned to this type of TSGUs. As it was shown earlier, 15 out of 16 voivodeships have undertaken at least one activity within the CoFoE. No other result presented above shows the higher (or even similar) activity. So why is it the voivodeships that are the most involved in the Conference? It seems that in Polish circumstances the informal practice was established, according to which the voivodeships have adopted the role of the TSGUs "institutionally engaged" at the EU level. Such choice seems to be justified as the voivodeships have the sufficient size and finances to afford being present in Brussels. Regarding other types of TSGU, only a few of the biggest cities would be able to do that. Furthermore, in geographical terms, the voivodeship's engagement at the EU level covers the whole state. Therefore, the smaller TSGUs – counties and municipalities – can be also considered to be somewhat represented as their interests can be included in the general interests of the voivodeship they are located in. This is why the Polish law regarding the selection procedure for the candidates for members and alternates of the CoR states that all of the voivodeships shall be represented in that EU's advisory body. And this is also why the voivodeships have the Regional Offices in Brussels. So, these Offices are not determinants of anything. They themselves are a

result of the voivodeships taking on a role of the TSGUs taking care of the EU affairs. Since this practice covers the whole area of the EU's activity, it is also valid when it comes to measures of different character than economic. Hence, it also concerns the citizens-oriented enterprises like the CoFoE. Naturally, neither is the practice guarded by the legal principles nor the voivodeships try to prevent the other TSGUs from taking some measures focused at the EU level. As it was shown, there are some counties and municipalities that were active within the CoFoE. However, their activity was rather incidental – as were the causes for taking some actions. Among them are for example the activity of the nearby Europe Direct Information Centre or the personality of the head of the TSGU. There is no visible trend in that regard. The tendency can be spotted only in case of the voivodeships. That could be a sign that the TSGUs of the other types have also accepted the practice and do not interfere with the current state of affairs. Does this conclusion mean that the original hypothesis has to be rejected? Not necessarily. However, the “engagement” should be redefined. At the beginning, it was understood in the formal terms, meaning membership in the CoR, running the Regional Office in Brussels or membership in the Conference Plenary. At this point, the formal understanding should be replaced with the substantive one, meaning the practice that was established among the TSGUs at the national level. The formal meaning is the consequence of the substantive meaning. In such circumstances, the original hypothesis can be upheld.

The scope of the second major conclusion goes beyond Poland as it relates to the general performance of the CoFoE. The Conference was an unprecedented enterprise aiming at reaching the wider public and involving as many citizens in the debate as possible. There were several ways of ensuring that goal and using help of the local and regional authorities was only one of them. Nevertheless, having in mind that the CoFoE was supposed to “reach every corner of the EU”, the activity of the TSGUs can be considered as a significant factor contributing to the final assessment of the Conference. The results presented in this paper dictate to consider the CoFoE rather in terms of the failure - especially in light of the original ambitions. The Conference has not exceeded the “European bubble”. As it was shown, only one rural municipality have taken some actions concerning the CoFoE. There were no urban-rural municipalities and 7 urban municipalities active in that regard. The tendency according to which it is the most difficult to reach and engage the citizens from the smaller and/or rural communities has been proven many

times and the Conference has been no exception to that. Moreover, the CoFoE has not even filled out the “bubble” since it did not engage all (or at least vast majority) of the Polish TSGUs “institutionally engaged” (in a formal way) at the EU level. Out of 35 TSGUs of this category, 15 have not done anything concerning the Conference. This result goes even lower when eliminating the activity of the voivodeships, leaving us with 4 active TSGUs. Having in mind all the effort that was put behind the Conference, this is rather not the outcome that was wanted from the beginning. The “bubble” can be considered as filled out only when its boundaries are limited to the entities substantially involved, like the Polish voivodeships. However, it does not make the assessment any lighter for the CoFoE as the size of the “bubble” (and in consequence – the participants of the Conference) is significantly reduced. These remarks lead to one additional conclusion. It is somewhat difficult for the *ad hoc* enterprises (regardless of the scale of the attempts) to break the long-standing institutional practice (cf. Risse 2019, p. 134). Even though the CoFoE was substantially different from the other opportunities for the local and regional authorities to be involved at the EU level (because of its citizens-oriented and non-economic character), it did not change much regarding the behaviour of the Polish TSGUs. The unofficial principle has prevailed.

One should remember that these conclusions are based on the empirical results from Poland – one of the 27 member states the CoFoE took place in. Hence, they can explain the behaviour of the Polish TSGUs, but they might not match the results from the other member states in the analysed matter. Especially since Poland was not among the most active state in regard to CoFoE. As the Multilingual Digital Platform Report states, Poland was the state with the least contributions per the number of inhabitants (26 per 1 million [Conference on the Future of Europe, 2022b]). Furthermore, Poland did not organise the National Citizens’ Panel. Therefore, the results from other member states may show the greater activity of the TSGUs. Such study would bring a different perspective and allow to assess the performance of the CoFoE in a more scrutinised way. Nevertheless, the results presented in this paper alone can contribute to the debate as they show the state of affairs in one of the biggest member states of the EU.

6. Conclusions

The local and regional authorities are in a better position than their European counterparts when it comes to reaching the citizens. It stems from the fact that it is easier to engage the citizens in the smaller communities. However, in a situation where the TSGU is not an organiser, but the participant of the initiative, one additional factor comes into play. It is the institutional environment, consisting of *inter alia* access to the information and the relation between the TSGU and the actual organiser. The CoFoE was such an enterprise. It has attempted to involve as many citizens as possible. Engaging the local and regional authorities was one of the measures to achieve that goal since the subnational level is considered to be “closer to the people”. The results indicate that the Conference – at least in that area – cannot be considered as successful. Not only has it not reached “every corner of the EU”, but it also has had troubles engaging the TSGUs that are present at the EU level, as members or alternates of the CoR. Despite its innovative character, the CoFoE did not change the “division of labour” of the Polish TSGUs. As a result, only these TSGUs that are normally dealing with the EU affairs have undertaken some actions regarding the Conference. The institutional habits have occurred to be stronger than the attempts to reach beyond the “bubble”. Nevertheless, even if that is the case it does not mean that the further attempts to work with the local and regional authorities to engage the citizens in the discussions about the EU should not be undertaken. It takes some time and actions to form a habit as well as to change it. The CoFoE should be a lesson for the EU institutions on how to include the subnational level in the EU’s activity more efficiently. Regarding the “Europe through the Regions”, it is up to the future actions of the European institutions to see if this model will be developed. For now, we can say that its rise does not have to mean the fall of the “Europe with the Regions” model. These two models focus on the different aspects of subnational level’s activity at the European level (participatory and representative, respectively). Furthermore, they can be attributed to the different institutional settings. For instance, the Regional Offices in Brussels can be associated with the representative aspect, whereas “Building Europe with Local Councillors” – with the participatory one (the CoR could combine both). Hence, the “Europe through the Regions” has the potential to enrich the picture of local and regional level’s European activity. After all, this is what the citizens are calling for in the Conference’s Final Report.

Bibliography

1. ABELS, G. (2022) The Conference on the Future of Europe in Germany: Activities at federal and Länder level. In: ABELS, G. (ed). *Jahrbuch des Föderalismus 2022*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 102-119.
2. ANTAL, J. (2022) Conference on the Future of the EU in Czechia: Success or failure? In: ABELS, G. (ed). *Jahrbuch des Föderalismus 2022*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 159-168.
3. BAÇAL, P. (2022b) Local and Regional Politics at the EU level: who is actually represented in the Committee of the Regions?, *Politics in Central Europe*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 201-224.
4. BAÇAL, P. (2022a) The Committee of the Regions: on the mission to reinforce the democratic legitimacy of the European Union, *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 53-75.
5. BÖRZEL, T. A., RISSE, T. (2003) Conceptualizing the domestic impact of Europe. In: FEATHERSTONE, K., RADAELLI, C., (eds.), *The politics of Europeanization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 150-171.
6. CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE (2021) *Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe*. Available at: <https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/9340/sn02700.en21.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2023).
7. CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE (2022a) *Report on the Final Outcome*.
8. CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE (2022b) *Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Final Report May 2022*.
9. COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (2022a) *Citizens, Local Politicians and the Future of Europe. Final Report*.
10. COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (2022b) *Resolution on the outcome and follow-up of the Conference on the Future of Europe*, RESOL-VII/023.
11. COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (2022c) *Report of the High Level Group on European Democracy*.

12. COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, BERTELSMANN STIFTUNG (2022) *Europe up close. Local, Regional and Transnational Citizens' Dialogues on the Future of the European Union.*
13. COUNCIL (2022) *Proposals and related specific measures contained in the report on the final outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe: Preliminary technical assessment*, 10033/22.
14. CRUM, B. (2023) Models of EU Constitutional Reform: What do we learn from the Conference on the Future of Europe?. *Global Constitutionalism*, pp. 1-19.
15. EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2022a) *Annex to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Conference on the Future of Europe, Putting Vision into Concrete Action.* COM(2022) 404 final.
16. EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2022b) *State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen.*
Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493 (accessed 17 June 2023).
17. EUROPEAN COUNCIL (2022) *European Council meeting (23 and 24 June) – Conclusions*, EUCO 24/22.
18. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (2022) *Resolution of 9 June 2022 on the call for a Convention for the revision of the Treaties*, (2022/2705(RSP)).
19. EUROPEAN UNION (2022) *Building Europe with Local Councillors.* Available at: https://building-europe-with-local-councillors.europa.eu/index_en (accessed 25 June 2023).
20. GOVERNMENT OF CATALONIA (2021) *17 regions from 10 member states call for a greater involvement in the debate of the Conference on the Future of Europe.* Available at: <https://catalangovernment.eu/catalangovernment/news/408442/17-regions-from-10-member-states-call-for-greater-involvement-in-the-debate-of-the-conference-the-future-of-europe> (accessed 17 June 2023).

21. HOOGHE, L., MARKS, G. (1996) “Europe with the regions”: channels of regional representation in the European Union, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 73-92.
22. JENSON, J., MERAND, F. (2010) Sociology, institutionalism and the European Union, *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 8 no. 1, 74-92.
23. KÖLLING, M. (2022) The Conference on the Future of Europe and the Autonomous Communities in Spain. In: ABELS, G. (ed). *Jahrbuch des Föderalismus 2022*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 146-158.
24. MARKOWICZ, P., TOSIEK, P. (2023) Deliberative Democracy or Deliberative Supranationalism? Preliminary Insights from the Conference on the Future of Europe, *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 161-184.
25. MOORE, C. (2008) A Europe of the regions vs. the regions in Europe: Reflections on regional engagement in Brussels. *Regional & Federal Studies*, vol. 18, no. 5, pp. 517-535.
26. OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (2020) *Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions on the Conference on the Future of Europe*, C 141/02.
27. OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (2021a) *Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe*, C 91 I/01.
28. OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (2021b) *Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions on the Conference on the Future of Europe*, C 300/01.
29. OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (2022a) *Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions on the contribution of local and regional authorities to the Conference on the Future of Europe*, C 270/01.
30. OLEART, A. (2023) The political construction of the ‘citizen turn’ in the EU: disintermediation and depoliticisation in the Conference on the Future of Europe. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1-15.
31. PANARA, C. (2019) The ‘Europe with the Regions’ before the Court of Justice. *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 271-293.

32. PANARA, C., VARNEY, M. R. (2017) Multi-level governance in the EU and EU democracy: Democratic legitimacy, democratic accountability and transparency of the European offices of the English local authorities in Brussels. *Regional & Federal Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 153-170.
33. PETERS, T., ZIEGENBALG, F. (2022) The contribution of Baden-Württemberg to the Conference on the Future of Europe – Taking the conversation to the people. In: ABELS, G. (ed). *Jahrbuch des Föderalismus 2022*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 120-129.
34. PETZOLD, W. (2022) The Conference on the Future of Europe and the involvement of the European Committee of the Regions. In: ABELS, G. (ed). *Jahrbuch des Föderalismus 2022*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 63-77.
35. REH, C., HERITIER, A., BRESSANELLI, E., KOOP, C. (2013) The informal politics of legislation: Explaining secluded decision making in the European Union, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 46, no. 9, pp. 1112-1142.
36. RISSE, T. (2019) Social Constructivism and European Integration. In: WIENER, A., BÖRZEL, T., RISSE, T. (eds.), *European integration theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 128-150.
37. SAUTTER, A. M., REUCHAMPS, M. (2022) The Belgian experiments of deliberative democracy – An analysis of the institutionalisation of deliberative citizen participation in multi-level Belgium. In: ABELS, G. (ed). *Jahrbuch des Föderalismus 2022*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 90-101.
38. SCHAKEL, A. H. (2020) Multi-level governance in a ‘Europe with the regions’. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 767-775.
39. TATHAM, M. (2018) The rise of regional influence in the EU—from soft policy lobbying to hard vetoing. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 672-686.