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Commonality with National Meaning: National  
Sovereignty and the Boundaries to EU Identity in the  
Baltic States

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# Commonality with National Meaning: National Sovereignty and the Boundaries to EU Identity in the Baltic States

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## Abstract<sup>2</sup>

The article, through the analysis of national collective identities, aims to reveal the possible nature of a common European identity and the potential limits of European commonality. The shared European language of values and goals outlined in the founding documents of the Union defines the collective EU identity of the Member States. The article argues that the pivotal concept in understanding the boundaries of a common EU identity is the notion of national sovereignty. The formulations of common European values and goals present challenges to elites in reconciling these terms with the aspirations of national sovereignty.

The article examines the interpretations of common European identity and values presented by the political elites of the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). EU membership for all three countries creates serious identity tensions related to national sovereignty. The article analyses how the political elites of these states navigate the components of national sovereignty within the context of European commonality. It posits that each country's distinct understanding of national sovereignty delineates varying boundaries of a common EU identity. The adaptability of national identity pertains to elements that can be considered peripheral, contrasting with the non-negotiable core elements of national sovereignty.

## Keywords:

Baltic states,  
EU identity,  
national identity,  
sovereignty,  
European common  
values

## Introduction

The constituent states of Europe have different national identities that influence the national projections of what the identity of Europe and the EU is, or even should be. This article, through the analysis of national collective identities, aims to reveal the possible nature of a common European identity and the potential limits of European commonality.

The relationship of European identity with national identities is at least partially explained through a phenomenon referred to as 'many different Europes' or the 'Europe of multiple identities'.

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There is no vision of Europe that is common to all, instead, there are 'national Europes' (Lehti 2004 p. 40). Even the interpretation of European 'common values' can significantly differ depending on the country concerned (Pelabay, Nicolaidis and Lacroix, 2010 p. 359).

The varying narratives of Europe supported by the national elites, as well as the vision of how they should be expressed in EU institutions, are not simply different but also competing (Pelabay, Nicolaidis and Lacroix 2010, p. 336). The Member States aspire to transplant their national traditions and experience into the EU as a whole (Pedersen 2008, p. 157).

The varying visions of Europe among the nations also shape different expectations for the common future of the Union. For instance, Italian elites perceive their nation as culturally open and, accordingly, project the vision of a united Europe as a container for "multiple cultural communication flows" (Telò 2010, p. 133). On the other hand, Polish elites view their nation as having preserved the core values of Christian Catholic Europe and believe their mission in Europe, which has supposedly forgotten its Christian heritage, is to strengthen Christianity within the present-day EU (Gora and Mach 2010, p. 230). The differences correspond to the political and cultural experiences that have shaped the identities of each nation.

On the other hand, the European visions of individual nations are also not uniform (Putinaite 2014). Country elites may compete among themselves, striving to establish different visions of Europe, thereby impacting collective identity. A more pronounced promotion of one vision over the others may also depend on the political situation, which encourages the elites to substantiate certain decisions identity-wise.

There are different approaches to the stability of the national identity of EU Member States during the integration process and to the limits of the elite's possibilities to reconstruct collective identity. Some authors see the elites' efforts to balance the benefits of integration and the preservation of national identity (Petersen 1998, p. 37), while others view identities (national or regional) as not being strictly fixed, and that may shift with learning (McSweeney 1999, pp. 126-128) or be re-constructed by the elites during the integration process (Jurkynas 2006, p. 230). The processes of interaction among actors shift the nature of integration (Christiansen, Jorgensen and Wiener 1999, p. 529). This article maintains that elites express national identity more than they reconstruct it.

The article argues that the key concept in understanding the boundaries of a common EU identity is the idea of national sovereignty. Some authors argue that the traditional notion of national sovereignty has become outdated, "an anachronism and an illusion," and the state's sharing of almost all basic sovereign rights is the major structural feature of the EU (Allott 2002, pp. 177-178).

Others encourage a deeper understanding of national sovereignty as a key concept for comprehending the contemporary global configuration (Walker 2020, p. 370). They argue that populist movements within the EU aim to reclaim sovereignty in response to the collective self-restriction of the sovereign powers of the states (Walker 2020, pp. 426-427; Kallis 2018). They posit that a collective understanding of sovereignty can explain certain puzzles related to the obstacles to integration (Risse 2005, p. 302). While some authors understand national sovereignty as touching on core state powers (Kuhn and Nicoli 2020), the article relies on a broader conception: sovereignty as being deeply embedded in the collective identity of a nation-state (Risse 2005, p. 303) and functioning as an integrational factor for a political community (Walker 2021, p. 9). The article argues that each country's unique understanding of national sovereignty delineates different

boundaries of a common EU identity. The flexibility of national identity pertains to elements that can be termed peripheral, in contrast to the non-negotiable core elements of national sovereignty.

In order to demonstrate this, this paper examines the interpretations of common European identity and values put forth by the political elites of the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania).

It has been argued that the term 'Baltic States' is an invention of the 1990s when the West grouped the three countries into one geopolitical entity (Paulauskas 2006, p. 21). However, the Baltic States have had a similar history of occupations and national independence over the past century: they were part of the Russian Empire, had a brief period of independence between the wars, were occupied by the Soviet Union, declared independence in 1990-1991, and joined the EU and NATO in 2004. These countries differ in their approaches to citizenship rights and policies regarding Russian minorities (Solska 2011; Carpinelli 2019). All three strive to distance themselves from Russian influence but differ in their geopolitical orientation: towards the Nordic states (Estonia), Central Europe (Lithuania), and a state described as "left in a Baltic limbo" (Latvia) (Auers 2003, p. 67).

EU membership for all three countries creates identity tensions related to national sovereignty. Among all EU Member States, they alone were fully occupied by the Soviet Union. Their struggle for national sovereignty in the 1990s and subsequent EU accession meant safeguarding sovereignty from Russia and its limitation at the same time, which is politically ambivalent (Lazič *et al.* 2012, p. 157). The countries still remember the Soviet experience of internationalism, which sets the stage for the conflict between nationalism and supranationalism (Best 2012, p. 213). The countries base their collective political identity on the dominant ethnos, which creates a dilemma for the elites in relying on ethnically-based nation-states in the context of a liberal and post-nationalist era of democratisation (Steen 2006, p. 205).

The common European language of values and goals stated in the founding documents of the Union defines the common EU identity of the Member States. These formulations pose challenges to the elites to reconcile the terms with the aspirations of national sovereignty. The paper analyses how the political elites of the three states navigate the contents of national sovereignty within the context of European commonality.

Speeches of the national political elites are used for the purpose of this analysis, focusing on the meanings of the common European terms, concepts and goals contained in them. Speeches and statements by the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian foreign ministers, prime ministers and presidents delivered in 2004-2020 and concerning common issues of Europe and the EU have been selected for the analysis. The speeches were given at events discussing common issues of the present and future of the European Union. In order to focus on issues related to values and identity, speeches given at specialised meetings or forums addressing specific working matters of the Union, as well as particular security, economic, etc. issues, have not been selected because they typically involve highly specialised discussions. In order to avoid additional factors that might modify the identity position of a particular Member State (for example, the possible role of representing the whole European Union) the speeches delivered at other international organisations (UN, NATO) or countries outside the EU (China) have also not been selected. Also excluded are speeches delivered before the countries were accepted into the European Union, i.e. before May 1st, 2004. The main focus is on the speeches delivered in Europe and in European forums or national events.

Some of the speeches were intended for international audiences (at conferences or as guest lectures), but there are also some that were delivered to the local parliaments on special occasions when the foreign diplomatic corps was present. A statement published in the European press (*The Parliament Magazine*) was also included due to its high focus on the topic of the European identity.

In the selection of the speeches, the keywords were 'Europe', 'European values', 'European identity', 'the future of Europe' and the like, which appear in the text not just in the general context, but meaningfully, with explanations. The keywords had to have at least a paragraph dedicated to them and related utterances. In order to assure a proportionate distribution of the speeches over the years, no more than two speeches from the year that the country held the presidency of the Council of the EU (Lithuanian held it in 2013, Latvia in 2015, Estonia in 2017). In this way, 8 Estonian, 7 Latvian and 9 Lithuanian speeches delivered on different occasions and in different locations were selected.

The analysed speeches were delivered over a period of almost twenty years, during which the countries experienced various global shocks (crises) and changes in the dominant elites' party affiliations. These fluctuations were not taken into consideration for several reasons. Baltic political elites are not divided; they demonstrate broad party and expert consensus with a positive attitude towards EU membership and EU policies (Steen 2006, p. 201; Vilpišauskas 2011, pp. 14-15). They have avoided the harmful divisions among political elites and within the state that are common in post-Soviet Eastern Partnership countries (Mendelski 2016, pp. 113-114).

The pro-European stance of the country's elites during crises and geopolitical events did not weaken, even though support for certain EU policies decreased (Matonytė, Šumskas, and Morkevičius 2016; Austers 2017, p. 233). It is noted that even when compared to other East-Central European countries, the Baltic States exhibited much greater resilience to the poly-crisis, particularly in Europeanisation and democratisation (Ágh 2017).

The attitudes of the Baltic general public and elites towards the EU are not radically different, although Estonia stands out with a higher degree of consensus (Vilpišauskas 2011, p. 20). In general, even though the population has a relatively low societal appetite for European integration, Euro-optimists are the dominant opinion group in the Baltic States, with Latvians being the most sceptical (Austers 2017, pp. 208-212). It can therefore be argued that, to a significant extent, the positions of the elites also reflect the collective identity of the general public.

To highlight the collective aspect of identity, the text refers to the speeches of the political elites as to 'Latvia', 'Estonia' or 'Lithuania'. Common European values are defined in the Treaties of the European Union. This work focuses on the terms referring to common identity as identified in the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union (European Union 2008), which was produced after the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon. Similar value terms had already been formulated in the Constitution for Europe (European Union 2004), which was subsequently not ratified, and were discussed before the three states joined the EU.

The analysis of values and goals is centred around several questions. First, how each of the countries understands the integrational vision of the Union, defined as the goal to "promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among Member States" (European Union 2008, Title I, Article 3), and which aspects of solidarity, political, economic or social, they emphasise more. How do they integrate the common values defined as "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities)" (European Union 2008, Title I, Article 2) into this vision?

Second, what European world view do they provide, based on the provision that the Union “seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity” (European Union 2008, Title V, Article 21).

Third, how do the countries understand the cohesion of the identities of the national state and the Union? How does the country see its presence in the Union, and where are the limits of common action drawn, according to the premise that “the Member States confer competences to attain objectives they have in common” (European Union 2008, Title I, Article 1) and “facilitate the achievement of the Union’s tasks” (European Union 2008, Title I, Article 4)?

Next, we analyse the most prominent national meanings of common EU values and principles in each country (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania) to reveal the flexible aspects of national sovereignty. Later, the countries will be compared by raising the question of the possibilities for a common European identity.

### ***Latvia’s elites: The EU as a union of values and broadly understood national sovereignty***

Latvia associates European commonality with shared values, outlining very broad limits for national sovereignty. It sees the Union as an organisation where the members act based on common core values: “freedom, democracy, responsibility, the rule of law, human rights, equality, tolerance and welfare” (Zatlers 13-01-2009). Latvia speaks of the values characteristic of the Union as also being Latvian values, but which had been lost due to the historical circumstances. Throughout that time, Latvia had felt like it belonged to “Europe and its values”, and had maintained that feeling even while it was part of a country in which values were ideologised (Zatlers 13-01-2009). Therefore “freedom of thought, of religion, as well as all other civil liberties” are spoken of as “recovered” (Vike-Freiberga 18-01-2005).

Joining the Union is perceived less as a commitment to a certain common future than as a confirmation that it supports and maintains certain values. Other Member States of the Union are also referred to according to a certain similarity of values, as a ‘family’ (Vike-Freiberga 18-01-2005) or free and democratic nations. This indicates that Latvia perceives the identity of the Union in its own essentialist way, wherein the characteristic is not language or blood relations as in the case of ethnic essentialism, but instead, common values. Similarly, the future political task is considered to be encouraging discussions within the Union in order to agree about additional values “which we can place alongside those which are the foundation of the European Union” (Zatlers 13-01-2009).

The integration of countries into the Union is explained precisely as integration into a certain space of commonly acknowledged values. In reference to the expansion of the Union in 2004, Latvia mentions that this way, the Union has grown to be an “unprecedented space of liberties governed by democratic, humanistic values” (Vike-Freiberga 18-01-2005).

Immediately after joining the Union, Latvia did not speak much about the model of the future of Europe that it sees. In response to an identity question about what makes or would make Europe closer, it refers to “the sense of brotherhood and the sense of community among Europeans” (Vike-Freiberga 18-01-2005). Later it presents a slightly more concrete vision of the future of Europe, “based on strong regions from the Mediterranean to the Baltic Sea” (Zatlers 13-01-2009), united, but different. The inner unity of Europe is supposed to be achieved thanks to “powerful regions” (Zatlers 13-01-2009), which protect “their own interests”, but collaborate with each other

in order “to establish a network of welfare and development in all of Europe” (Zatlers 13-01-2009).

The question as to whether there should be more or less Europe is reshaped into the goal “to build a better Europe” (Straujuma 26-02-2015), the ‘goodness’ is explained as securing safety and welfare for regular Europeans. The vision of Europe is associated with the social welfare of the citizens, thus, in a way, expanding the rights of Europeans into the social sphere.

Latvia sees the EU not as an exclusive union, but as one of several international organisations (alongside the UN, NATO, OECD) to which it belongs together with other countries. Latvia does not believe that European commonality should be achieved by narrowing national sovereignty even somewhat noticeably: “Europe’s goals, in turn, can be achieved only if they are in line with the views of each and every member state” (Zatlers 13-01-2009). Stating that the members of the Union share common values, rights and freedoms, Latvia refers to great differences in the economies or even politics (development of democracy) among the states.

The exceptional significance of national sovereignty was expressed most prominently immediately upon joining the Union, when its transformative influences were primarily associated with the strengthening of democratic institutions: “One major challenge is to build open, democratic societies that respect the ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage of each European nation” (Vike-Freiberga 18-01-2005).

Membership in the Union and elsewhere is understood as stemming from the interest of strengthening the national state, first of all its sovereignty as well as the “rule of law, security and augmenting the economic growth” (Rinkēvičs 23-01-2020). Considering whether or not the EU should be more consolidated, act more together, it primarily emphasises the interest of the national state in international relations (Straujuma 26-02-2015) or neutralises the question in its own way by stating that a regular European cares less about the political nuances and more about the response to their interest “in jobs and prosperity, safe communities, or opportunities to study and travel” (Straujuma 26-02-2015). Whether that be achieved by means of national or EU policies is of far less significance.

The goals and ambitions of the Union are not seen as creating tighter relationships within it, but rather, as a platform for the outside. Being part of the Union makes it easier for the national sovereign state to react more quickly to global (economic) challenges: a “unique mechanism of cooperation”, in which all the national states are able to “work together to find active solutions to global challenges” (Zatlers 13-01-2009). Acting together with other Member States of the Union enhances the effectiveness of the EU in the world: “We are responsible before all of the people of Europe” (Zatlers 13-01-2009). By ‘we’, Latvia means the Latvian state.

### ***Estonian elites: The EU as a union of democratic and economic cohesion, and politically understood national sovereignty***

Estonia associates European commonality with the principle of democracy and the common market, but draws the boundary of national sovereignty at political institutions. Democracy and the common market are the two interrelated pillars upon which Estonia bases its vision of internal integration within the Union, as well as its mission for neighbouring countries. The principle of democracy is considered to be an exceptional basic principle: “We no longer analyse whether a nation is fit for democracy. Rather, we already know that countries become fit through democracy, if they choose to do so” (Paet 23-11-2007).

Democracy is understood as more than just a political principle, but also a civic and economic



principle guaranteeing “stability and prosperity”. The greatest achievements of the EU are considered to be its expansion and propagation of democracy (Paet 31-10-2006). The guarantee of the success of the national state is also seen in individual rights and freedoms, a person’s possibility to decide for themselves (Paet 23-11-2007).

As for the vision of the inner integration of Europe, Estonia grounds it in the common market and the reduction of any obstacles to the emergence of such a market. The boundary of national sovereignty is drawn at political and cultural elements. Upon joining the Union, Estonia declared its future goal to be “economic integration”, with the “intensification of political and cultural interrelations” following only after it (Ojuland 27-08-2004).

The successes and failures of the European Union, the crisis of faith in the Union are also discussed in economic terms: “economic success might be the very thing that can bring a new impetus to Europe today ... Undoubtedly, there is a link between economic progress and the general attitudes of people vis-à-vis their leadership” (Paet 2-11-2005). The potential for economic development, for Estonia, is based on the liberalisation of basic freedoms inside the Union in order to achieve “the free movement of goods, capital, persons and services” (Paet 31-10-2006). As for the idea of cohesion in Europe, Estonia sees it primarily as greater mobility and inside connections in Europe: “our goal is also to connect Europe physically – to develop energy, transport and communication solutions together with the digital internal market” (Rõivas 01-05-2014), rather than political cohesion among the countries.

In 2017, during its EU presidency, Estonia announced the initiative to create a “Digital Single Market” and stated its intentions to engage in talks with the Member States to achieve “free flow of data” (Maasikas 15-09-2017). It constantly emphasised the elimination of the various inner barriers to mobility or otherwise that interfere with the common market and mobility within the Union, or the prevention of new barriers emerging in this unity.

Estonia’s European vision of tighter physical connections is combined with scepticism regarding the development of the political commonality of the Union. It detected the political weakness of the Union in 2018 by stating that “Our Union is therefore politically fragile” and still encourages passionate supporters of the Union to emerge (Ratas 03-10-2018). The scepticism about the possibility of increasing political cohesion within the Union could be interpreted as the boundary drawn by national sovereignty for the EU’s common identity.

Estonia also views the EU’s activities in the world through two basic principles: liberal values and the principles of democracy. The global presence of the EU is seen more as the need to be economically competitive (Paet 02-11-2005). The Union is expected to act in the world politically as much as possible and spread to other countries the values holding us Europeans together: “democracy and the protection of human rights and other basic liberties” (Paet 02-11-2005). The mission of the Union is to develop “the global market for secure products and services” (Maasikas 15-09-2017), and accordingly to set international norms on the global scale and protect such values of European expansion as liberty and privacy.

Estonia envisions a close relationship between the EU and the nation-state, based on liberal values and the interests of economic competitiveness. A deeper inner integration of the Union is also a common interest and a common creation of the Member States, and requires: “solidarity and the willingness of the Member States to look beyond their national interests are indispensable” (Paet 02-11-2005), because integration too is understood as relinquishing some of the national interests for the sake of the unity of the Union. The countries are only capable of responding to

the global challenges of competitiveness by solving the European problems together (Paet 02-11-2005). By 'we', Estonia usually means the whole of Europe. The Union is "our common home" that we must take care of together (Rõivas 01-05-2014).

The relationships between the Member States are believed to be based on shared interests, grounded in values and democratic principles (Ratas 03-10-2018), and a common policy emerges from "sharing our sovereignty and pooling our strength, by having common policies" (Ratas 03-10-2018). The Estonian vision of the common EU could be summarised as tight economic collaboration, while disentangling economic interests from politically understood national sovereignty.

***Lithuania's elites: The EU as a tight-knit political union with national security as a priority for national sovereignty***

For Lithuania, the future vision of the EU is a tight-knit political union, while the boundary of national sovereignty is associated with elements of state security. The first sign of this was Lithuania's active support for the Treaty establishing the Constitution for Europe immediately after joining the Union in 2004. Lithuania ratified it very quickly, before any other country, and emphasised that it was the first to have ratified the treaty and the first to have committed to a life according to the Constitution: "It is a sign that Lithuania has become an inseparable part of a politically integrated Europe united by common social values." (Adamkus 12-11-2004). It was noted that Europe is paying dearly "for not having a clear political vision for Europe, for shunning the responsibility for the political integration of the EU" (Adamkus 12-11-2004).

Eventually the Treaty establishing the Constitution for Europe was not ratified by all Member States. However, even after that Lithuania continued to support a vision of the EU that is more tightly integrated politically. A strong Europe is seen as a united Europe, in which economic or simply value-based integration are not sufficient grounds for Europe to thrive successfully. There is a call for "the common vision of political and economic development of the EU" (Adamkus 07-10-2005) and the strengthening of the common institutions of the Union: "We need to agree on the institutional structure" (Adamkus 15-09-2008).

As the European Commission suggests considering five scenarios for the future of Europe (European Commission 2017), Lithuania supports those who foresee the tightest possible integration of the Member States, even if this only happens among those Member States favourable to that development: "Lithuania, already among the most integrated member states – both the Euro zone and the Schengen space – will actively participate in these processes and aim at remaining in the core of the EU" (Linkevičius 03-07-2017). The vision of a tighter integration of the Union and the expressed wish of belonging "with the core countries" is also repeated later (Linkevičius 03-07-2018).

Lithuania supports the vision of the EU presence in the world by its strong faith in the superiority and power of the Union, prioritising the rule of law over economic interests. Values like peace, democracy, sustainable growth, equal rights, respect for the human being should be supported in the world, because without such values "Lithuania itself would not exist" (Ažubalis 18-07-2012).

As for the vision of the relationship between the Union and the national state, Lithuania sees the Union as exceptional among international organisations (economic or trade). Immediately upon joining the Union, Lithuania refers to it as "a unique club" in the world and warns that "[w]e cannot afford putting national interests above interests and identity of the whole Europe" (Adamkus 07-10-2005).

What is so exceptional about the Union and what brings it together is the fact that it is “a union of values” (Grybauskaitė 28-11-2013). Values like “human rights, free elections and free media, the rule of law and pluralistic society” are grounds on which “relations of people and cooperation of member states are based” (Grybauskaitė 28-11-2013). Therefore, commonality in the Union, those things that unite and the unity based on them, are seen to be far more important than what separates the states.

The political strengthening of the Union can only be achieved if the national states “compromise” for the sake of solidarity (Adamkus 15-09-2008). This indicates that Lithuania cannot imagine a further strengthening of the Union without the political elements of national sovereignties being flexible for the sake of the common good. A more politically united Union in the future would suit the interests of Lithuania as a national state: “The more united and the stronger Europe, the better represented the Lithuanian interests in the world” (Vaitiekūnas 30-11-2006).

On the other hand, speeches reveal that Lithuania primarily perceives security objectives in a closer political union as complementing, rather than narrowing, national sovereignty. This becomes evident when discussing the EU’s influence in the neighbourhood. The collaboration among countries, as well as the expansion of European values, is linked to “stability and security,” the establishment of democracy, and security zones in the European neighbourhood (Vaitiekūnas 30-11-2006; Adamkus 07-10-2005).

Therefore, the strengthening of Europeanness is interpreted as not weakening national identity. European identity grows stronger by maintaining national identity; the “shaping of European self-consciousness” must be a daily task, and the citizens of the countries of the Union will become “more European” (Vaitiekūnas 30-11-2006) without losing their national identity. While advocating for a closer union, Lithuania has no doubts about the sustainability of its national identity (including its political identity) and sees European identity as something that must also be created in order to give grounds for the deeper unification of Europe. The Union is a common creation of everyone, politicians, businesses, artists, all citizens, as “our home” that we create together (Grybauskaitė 04-07-2013).

When Lithuania uses the term ‘we’, it quite often refers to “we the Europeans” or “we the European Union” (Adamkus 15-09-2008). Sometimes these ‘we’ identities even intertwine; it is not easy to say whether the position being advocated is that of the national state or the Union.

### **Conclusions: Diverse national sovereignties and varied EU commonality perspectives**

The analysis of the speeches of the elites of the three Baltic States, which share a very similar historical experience, reveals that these elites interpret EU commonality differently and draw boundaries along various elements of national sovereignty. Elites in all three countries unanimously agree that EU commonality is based on the declared values of Europe (respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and respect for human rights) and accept no compromise in that regard.

On the other hand, the elites interpret differently the commonly stated goal of the Union to encourage “economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among Member States” (European Union 2008, Title I, Article 3): for Latvia, it is primarily and solely a union of values; for Estonia, an economic one; and for Lithuania, a political one.

Similarly, they interpret the elements of ‘closer union’ differently. Latvia suggests that in the future, Europe should agree on additional rights that would be common to all European countries,

guaranteeing European cohesion and solidarity. Estonia places emphasis on the economic aspects of commonality, advocating for stronger economic cohesion and consistently promoting the removal of obstacles within the EU to establish the free-market model as quickly as possible. This includes creating free movement of goods and services and conditions for physical connections among people from various countries. Lithuania sees Europe as a political union achieved through common political structures, and unification on economic grounds is considered a byproduct.

Additionally, the countries have distinct conceptions of the Union's objectives in the world: the promotion of democratic principles and the pursuit of economic competitiveness (Estonia); collaboration with non-EU countries based more on economic benefits than values (Latvia); economic interests pushed aside in favour of democracy and security considerations (Lithuania).

The three countries also provide alternative interpretations of the identity relationship between the national state and the Union, expressed in the Union statements that the Member States confer competences to attain objectives they have in common and shall facilitate the achievement of the Union tasks. Estonia and Lithuania see the Union as a structure that the various states create together, which requires that they give up part of their national sovereignty (economic or political independence). Their 'we' associates with Europe and expresses a certain emotional relationship with Europe as an already existing common identity. Latvia is not inclined to compromise on national sovereignty in favour of the common interests of the Union; it prioritises the vision of a Union based on bilateral or regional relationships among its Member States. It refers to the Union as a 'family' in which 'we' means its individual member (Latvia).

The analysis reveals that the elites of the three countries grapple with the tension between national identity and EU normative principles (see Miniotaitė 2011, p. 118). However, this tension leads not so much to a reconstruction of national identities (Jurkynas 2006) but rather imbues European normativity with 'national' meanings.

A specific mechanism has emerged for combining the concept of national sovereignty with the elements of European commonality. The countries seem to infuse their national content into a European form, flexibly considering certain elements of national sovereignty while not compromising on others. This could be referred to as the 'moulded cake' model of common European identity, alongside the popular 'marble cake' model of multiple identities (Risse 2005, 296). The commonly stated European values and principles outlined in the documents of the Union do not homogenise national identities. Instead, the elites interpret the same terms in unique ways, adapting flexible elements to them while preserving immutable core elements of national sovereignty. Countries emphasise different aspects of flexibility: values are expanded at the European level (Latvia), economic relations are intensified (Estonia), and political institutions are strengthened (Lithuania).

If European commonality only touches upon peripheral elements of national sovereignty, then we should conclude that a common EU identity cannot develop more profoundly. This would mean that we need to encourage mutual acknowledgment of the different identities while directing collective energy towards achieving common projects and goals (Nicolaidis 2004, p. 97-110). Alternatively, we should be prepared for a very long and slow process of developing a common identity, focusing on generating a feeling of belonging to Europe, with the hope that the closeness among the societies of the Member States, which is promoted by the very existence of the Union (Risse 2011, p. 5), will progress.

However, there are indications in the speeches analysed in this study that certain core elements

of national sovereignty have the potential to become flexible. Firstly, the three countries clearly speak about the Europe they envision in the language used in European documents, regardless of how they interpret the terms of those documents. This not only provides a commonality to their identities, even if it does not run deep, but also creates a shared space for discussing common identity and, eventually, expanding it, if not in depth, then in breadth. For example, Estonia gradually broadens its initial vision of European cohesion, linking it not only to the removal of barriers in the single market but also to the cohesiveness of European society by fostering various connections between people whenever possible: “building connections that bring Europeans closer together – human, physical and professional connections” (Ratas 03-10-2018).

Secondly, and more importantly, the elites of the three countries hint at what could be seen as an improving expression of their national sovereignties within the EU itself, which might potentially soften the gap between the core and flexible elements of national sovereignty. Latvia declares a transformation of its role in the EU during its membership: it claims to have gained enough experience not only to implement but also to influence EU policies based on Latvian interests, particularly in the areas of resistance to disinformation and cybersecurity (Rinkēvičs 23-01-2020). Similarly, Estonia declares that, after 10 years of membership in the Union, it has grown larger: “we have made Estonia bigger together!” (Rõivas 01-05-2014), as its voice is better heard when addressing issues of the Union and the world. The understanding that specific elements of national sovereignty find their place in the common EU identity could lead to greater flexibility in national sovereignty.

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