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# European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings  
of the Survey in Latvia

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## THE POLITICS OF LATVIA'S SOVEREIGNTY

For people in Latvia, the word 'sovereignty' is an overall positive and modern term which connotes power, independence and freedom. It is a word whose relevance and purchase stretches beyond particular political positions and may very well be embraced by opposing factions. National sovereignty is regarded as a historical achievement, a moment of deep significance in the cultural memory of the nation, encapsulated in the Constitution of the country which is indeed seen as a sacred document. Since sovereignty is not something taken for granted, it is seen as something to be closely guarded from undue influences. As the country was occupied by the Soviet Union for 50 years, Latvia's sovereignty is considered never to be final.

The perceived fragility of political independence of the Latvian nation has had notable consequences on domestic and foreign policy. Domestically, the sovereignty of the country has produced division along ethnic lines. Since the basis of the state is the Latvian nation and the nation is conceptualised culturally, belonging to the state is marked through linguistic and historic signs. When Latvia's independence was restored in the early 1990s, the citizenship policy was explicitly formulated on the basis of descent rather than territory. 'The people' of Latvia – as the source of sovereignty - were constituted on a fairly exclusionary basis: citizenship was granted to those who had been citizens of Latvia as well as descendants of such citizens before 1941. In effect, this meant that a significant segment of the population that had arrived in Latvia

during the occupation of the Soviet Union were not granted rights that pertained to citizens even though many had expressed equal support to the independence of Latvia. Meanwhile, citizenship was automatically granted to the descendants of refugees now living abroad even if they had never been to Latvia. These political decisions contrast sharply with the citizenship policy pursued after World War I, when all residents of the new country – regardless of their ethnicity – were granted the opportunity to claim citizenship. The issue of citizenship in the early 1990s reflected an anxiety regarding the composition of the population which had changed significantly during the Soviet regime. The internal migration fostered by the Soviet Union during the occupation years had reduced the share of Latvians in the entire population to just 52% whereas in 1920 the share had been nearly 73%. Due to this political anxiety regarding the existential threat faced by the Latvian nation, the very nature and core of sovereignty in Latvia has been bound to produce domestic division and social fragmentation. Sovereignty is seen the prerogative of the Latvian nation defined in cultural terms.

Conceived as independence, sovereignty in the national context is thus, first and foremost, the ability to lead a political life without any interventions from others except if such interventions have been validated nationally. The ability to live in accordance with one's values, defined as democracy and the rule of law, but also articulated in national-cultural terms, is a secondary but still important aspect of sovereignty. Unlike post-imperial countries like France, Spain and Italy, the power to assert one's interests is considered a lesser feature of sover-

eignty. For smaller countries, independence of political action means the power to organise domestic affairs as it sees fit rather than the possibility of extending one's freedom to act in other communities and territories. In Latvia, sovereignty is essentially a passive concept and power can be deployed only as a form of self-defence rather than actively and attackingly.

Latvia's foreign policy since the restoration of independence reveals another national peculiarity regarding the way sovereignty has been conceptualised on the local level. The one political idea that enjoyed complete consensus across the parliamentary spectrum in the 90s was joining the European Union and the NATO. Thus, the ordinary attributes of sovereignty – the ability to determine and order one's security policy and, the legal system more generally, were not perceived as essential constituent elements of the restored political power. In fact, delegating effective decision-making over these domains to other political entities was perceived as crucial for sustaining and ensuring Latvia's sovereignty. It was a perception borne out of the interwar experience which demonstrated the sovereign limits of small countries which thereby have to seek international alliances to preserve the possibility of practicing and furthering the rights of their nation. It is precisely the geopolitical vulnerability of Latvia – perceived and real – which affords the notion of 'European sovereignty' with an overall positive sentiment. The results of the survey regarding the desire to strengthen both – national and European – sovereignties have to be read in a primarily geopolitical light and as issues of security.

## EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The complementary view of national and European sovereignties is further reinforced by the fact that the EU is not seen as encroaching upon national privileges. As noted above, the Latvian nation defines itself culturally rather than politically and thus the identity of the nation is expressed through language, cultural practices and shared social memory. Since the EU does not in any way prohibit and may be even seen as celebrating national expressions, it is not perceived as a threat to national sovereignty and is indeed regarded as a guarantor of it. In the case of Latvia, the ability to determine economic policy – normally a significant attribute of sovereignty – is not directly linked to the notion of sovereignty. This is evidenced in the survey too as the respondents do not associate the term with 'protectionism' whereas in the past the freedom to impose import quotas and tariffs was precisely how the exercise of sovereignty was articulated. Similarly, when Latvia joined the Eurozone, it was not regarded as a loss of monetary sovereignty. The replacement of the currency was marked by certain grievances over the cultural importance of a national currency rather than the kind of economic power it might afford. Additionally, the political control emanating from Frankfurt and Brussels is seen as a desirable external check on the potential fiscal profligacy and corruption on a national scale. While the former is not necessarily based in historical evidence, the latter has undoubtedly shaped the need for an external anchor, much like in the case of Italy. Thus, the powers of sovereignty themselves are fragmented and dispersed

across non-national institutions. However, as long as European sovereignty does not threaten the national privileges of the Latvian nation, it will remain a complementary rather than contradictory element of political power.

The marked geographical differences regarding the notion of European sovereignty between younger and older Member States is largely explained by the same historical and geopolitical vulnerability experienced by the former. For Member States like Latvia and Romania, Europe is a symbolic referent of welfare: membership in the political union is regarded as the surest way of raising living standards and quality of life. If that means that aspects of sovereignty have to be delegated away, then there is little resistance to it. For this reason, there is a certain level of trust about decisions made in Brussels and Frankfurt that concern economic policy. Since institutions for political participation on a national level are weak, the democratic deficit normally ascribed to European institutions and thus the experience of insufficient representation is not perceived as a feature of Europe. Instead, the basic political divide with popular relevance is between the national government and society. Nevertheless, there is some internal geographic variation regarding European sovereignty: Latgale is a region in Latvia that consistently has the worst socio-economic indicators and levels of unemployment in the whole country. It is also the region closest to Russia and culturally most distinct – thus likely to harbour less pro-European sentiments as the supposed benefits of the EU have not been distributed to the same extent as in the rest of the country.

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOVEREIGNTY DEBATES

The impact of the pandemic on the way Latvia's society sees and discusses European sovereignty has further reinforced the trends outlined in the previous section. Firstly, the debates of last summer regarding corona-bonds and an EU-wide fiscal package affirmed Latvia's potential openness for a more federal structure of the European Union. Latvia did not have a strong position regarding the desirability of shared European debt and took on the role of a silent but active observer ready to support the majority position. There were no democratic and explicit political debates about the possibility of shared debt and what the pros and cons would be for a country like Latvia if indeed common debt was issued. Philosophically and historically Latvia has embraced an austerity and singular responsibility view articulated by the 'Frugal Four'; nevertheless shared European debt would lessen anxiety over the size of the national debt and make potentially more investment available locally. In any case, the lack of national debate regarding the basic political dilemmas confirmed that monetary and even fiscal policies are not regarded as essential attributes of national sovereignty. Accordingly, it is likely that further measures toward the creation of a fiscal union would find a receptive audience in Latvia.

Furthermore, planning for investment with Resilience and Recovery funds (RRF) highlighted previously existing local tensions and their relation with the EU. The process of designing a portfolio of desirable investments has been highly restric-

tive, uneven and chaotic. The contents of the plan as well as the political approach has changed several times, most notably, in response to the objections posed by the European Commission. In its European Semester reports, the Commission has repeatedly stressed the need for investments that reduce inequality levels and institute support for the least protected and most vulnerable people in society. Nevertheless, the initial RRF plan submitted to the Commission attempted to engage with these issues only half-heartedly instead reflecting the political power positions of certain Ministries and the lobbying capacity of the private sector. The Commission emphasised again the need to pay more attention to the way these investments might solve particular social problems which was regarded as an uncomfortable task and it currently appears that only lip service will be paid to these requests. The civil sector has therefore regarded the interventions by the Commission as necessary and supportive of their efforts to advocate investments and changes in social policies, for example, instituting socially responsible procurement procedures and rendering funds available to NGOs and foundations as well. Europe is still perceived as an external check and anchor by key segments of the society that are able to legitimize their demands by referring to documents and arguments made by the European Commission. However, even the political sector did not openly view the objections to the RRF plan made by the EC as somehow invalid or politically unjustified and certainly not as infringements on national sovereignty. Europe remains a moral and political leader in the eyes of the national political elite.

## EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY

Mixed feelings about whether Europe is sovereign today reflect the particular way sovereignty is conceptualised nationally: as the power to express cultural identity within the framework of a state. This same understanding cannot be meaningfully transposed on a European level where sovereignty has a more active geopolitical element to it. There is a notable lack of political debate regarding the role of the EU globally, digital governance and competitiveness, and the Green New Deal. European sovereignty is a broad and undefined concept as evidenced by survey results regarding elements Europe needs to have in order to be more sovereign: the only aspect Latvians feel particularly strongly about is the strong defence of values. This reflects the national understanding of sovereignty as based on moral values expressed culturally and the need to *defend* it. In other elements, Latvia tends to embody the average view between divergent perspectives. Furthermore, as there is no clear, publicly established and cultivated link between control of digital infrastructure – a hot geopolitical topic – and sovereignty, people in Latvia worry about the issue a lot less than others.

While Latvians do share in the view that European sovereignty has to be strengthened, it is for reasons already foreshadowed in the remarks above: as Latvia is a small country, it can imagine having a global relevance only through a much larger political entity, like the EU. Moreover, the function of more solidified European sovereignty is again to defend against potentially catastrophic clashes between Russia and the USA, a

repeat of a Cold War. The emergence of China and its potential alliance with Russia is not yet a serious political factor in the local debates. Similarly, the rise of the tech sector and its potential capacity to encroach on civil liberties and determine the policy of formally sovereign countries is seen as a distant threat much like climate change. In the case of the latter, Latvia tends to see itself as a naturally green and climate-friendly country with the necessary investments in renewable energy perceived as potentially price-inflating and therefore undesirable. As a result, the RRF funding intended for digital and green investment did not meet with ready-made, transformative and ambitious projects. The role of these sectors as determinants of sovereignty is not yet appreciated.

## THE GLOBAL DIMENSION

Geopolitics continues to be seen in bilateral terms, as a struggle between the USA and Russia with Europe in the middle. The obstacles toward a stronger European sovereignty are not seen in geo-economic terms or as the result of internal division and institutional weakness. Instead, obstacles are believed to be placed by actors that see Europe as a moral enemy and as an embodiment of hostile values. It reflects the Cold War mind-set whereby the world is primarily imagined as a site of competing moral claims rather than material interests. Nationalist leaders within Europe and cultural differences between European nations are not defined as obstacles at all – in fact, as noted above, such cultural differences are seen as constituent elements of the very idea of Europe and therefore as aspects to be celebrated. Nationalism remains a strong political sentiment and thus any European nation that asserts its national privilege to pass policy will receive a favourable review even if it might endanger the capacity of the EU to act on the global stage.

## A CONCEPT WITH POTENTIAL

What do these results and reflections mean in terms of future policy-making? To begin with, any comprehensive reform is going to be possible only as long as the EU continues to respect the national privileges the state affords to the Latvian nation. This means that the EU cannot in any way be seen as determining, let alone limiting, language and cultural policy and has to continue to evince a shared understanding of Soviet aggression in the past. This political stance has significant implications for migration policy. The refugee crisis of 2015 revealed a strongly held view regarding the power of the EU to impose solidarity across member states in terms of distributing the responsibility to welcome and integrate the displaced persons. Such mandatory quotas were seen as direct infringements on national sovereignty since ethnically different people are perceived as potential threats on the 'Latvian way of life'. An existential anxiety regarding the reproduction of the nation has been incipient since the restoration of independence and the subsequent waves of emigration due to economic hardship have only catered to these unnerving sentiments. Any immigration of people perceived to be culturally distinct, however small or large the number, can only be seen to happen voluntarily, as an autonomous decision made by

Latvia. If Brussels acts unilaterally on the issue, it will evoke immediate associations with the immigration policies of the Soviet Union.

Importantly, this appears to be the only limiting factor when considering any revision of EU policy competencies. In any other area, there will be notably less resistance to the EU taking over decision-making. Like others, Latvia too considers a prosperous economy to be a significant feature and element of a sovereign Europe. If that means changing the monetary policy or the relationships between the European Central Bank and the national governments, Latvia will follow the lead and accept any changes. If future competencies include a more fiscal union, then this is also likely to be welcomed as the political struggle to properly reform the tax policy has been going on for years without a meaningful outcome. In terms of social policy, Latvia has not had a properly designed social protection system at all: there are only abstractly articulated goals but the actual policy remains uncoordinated, unevaluated, not based on actual needs and with no political willpower to change it. Having the EU play a more active role in domains such as poverty reduction, social protection, minimum wage policy and even healthcare would not be seen as infringements of national sovereignty and may even be welcomed as helpful moves compensating local failings. Latvia would likewise support a stronger and more active security policy for explicitly national reasons. The perceived ongoing threat of Russia and the recent escalation of conflict in the Ukraine would lend all the necessary support for a militarily stronger Europe.

In a sense, the results of the survey do not demonstrate anything fundamentally new. For Eurosceptics and illiberal leaders, the political game to be played is clear: catering to nationalistic impulses, displacing responsibility for negative socio-economic outcomes on to the EU while retaining membership in

it, and even using the membership as leverage against Russia. This is, in fact, a game that the EU permits playing and can do very little about within the current institutional and political design. For progressive forces, the basic dilemmas are also clear: first, any kind of revision of EU competencies, investment goals and geopolitical decisions cannot encroach upon national privileges. 'Nation' and not 'class' is the determining political factor in the national debates. It calls for a delicate balancing act, furthering policies whose goal is to afford welfare to anyone regardless of nationality while respecting the nationalistic impulses in places like Latvia. Secondly, if the EU is to attain a prosperous economy then a fundamental reform of its monetary institutions will have to take place. Whether that means creating shared European debt or several monetary spaces based either regionally or on economic capacity or a retreat from the common European monetary project as a whole, the progressive forces have to tackle the issue head-on.

The meaning of the term 'European sovereignty', reflecting a multipolar reading of global politics, is completely foreign in the national debates. As noted above, Latvia continues to perceive international affairs as a bilateral struggle which determines the national politics as well. Since the term is not yet inflected with concrete meaning, there is every reason to suppose that it can become politically operational. However, the moment it is seen as opening the doors toward more friendly or strategically flexible relations with Russia, the term will be viewed with hostility. At the same time, European sovereignty may become a term used by progressive forces that not only are aware of the new geopolitical realities, but desire a different, better political and economic framework within Europe too. If the progressive forces on a national level are able to push forward with their economic policies without threatening the nationalist sentiment, then European sovereignty may very well become the descriptor of future politics – both internally and internationally.

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