

The Baltic States Twenty Years after the EU's “Big Bang” Enlargement: Political, Economic, and Social Transformations

Aleksandra Palkova¹

Abstract: *The article offers a unique and comprehensive reflection on the 20-year membership of the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — in the European Union (EU), highlighting the multifaceted impacts of their integration across the political, economic, and societal spheres. The novelty of this paper lies in its holistic approach to the Baltic states’ evolution from new EU members to proactive leaders. Politically, the Baltic states have transitioned from passive participants to influential actors, particularly in response to regional security challenges, such as the Russian threat. Economically, their adoption of the euro and integration into the Schengen Area have bolstered their stability and growth within the EU’s single market. Societally, EU membership has reinforced democratic values and human rights, marking a clear departure from Soviet-era influences. This focus on the small states as proactive agents in shaping EU policy, rather than merely beneficiaries of EU membership, offers a fresh perspective on their contributions to the EU’s development over the past two decades. The article brings valuable insights into the broader discourse on EU enlargement and the future trajectory of the European project.*

Keywords: *Baltic states, EU integration, “Big Bang” enlargement, EU accession, small states, case study.*

Introduction

In 2024, the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — along with other countries from the “Big Bang” enlargement, marked the 20th anniversary of their accession to the European Union (EU).² The path to EU membership for these states began on October 27, 1995, when their governments formally submitted applications for EU membership, initiating a complex and demanding process of candidacy and accession negotiations.³ This period was characterised by profound political, economic, and social reforms, aimed at aligning them with the stringent criteria required for EU integration.

¹Aleksandra Palkova is the Head of the EU Programme at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Lecturer at Riga Stradiņš University, and Associate Researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

E-mail: aleksandra.palkova@rsu.lv.

²Public broadcasting of Latvia, (2024). “Baltic Presidents on 20 years of European Union membership”, *Eng.LSM.lv*, May 2. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/commentary/02.05.2024-baltic-presidents-on-20-years-of-european-union-membership.a552605/>. Braghiroli, S., (2024). “The Baltics have grown up: Do not call them new member states”, *New Eastern Europe*, June 22. Available at: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/06/22/the-baltics-have-grown-up-do-not-call-them-new-member-states/>.

³Kapustans, J., (2002). “Baltic States and EU Accession Negotiations: An Assessment”, *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, pp. 47-55. Available at: <https://www.liia.lv/en/publications/baltic-states-and-eu-accession-negotiations-an-assessment-49>.

The process of accession reached its critical juncture in the early 2000s, when each of the Baltic states held referendums to gauge public support for EU membership. In Latvia, 67.49% of voters approved the nation's entry into the EU, with 32.51% voting against.⁴ Similarly, in Estonia's 2003 referendum, 63% of the electorate voted in favour of joining the Union, while 37% opposed it.⁵ Lithuania exhibited the strongest support, with an overwhelming 91.1% of voters endorsing EU membership in their 2003 referendum, and the turnout was 63.37%, which exceeded the required threshold.⁶ These results reflected not only the popular desire to break away from the Soviet past, but also a deep commitment to rejoining the broader European community. The official accession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to the European Union on May 1, 2004, was a historic moment that marked their full reintegration into Europe.⁷

A key aspect of this integration was the inclusion of the Baltic states into the Schengen Area on December 21, 2007.⁸ The removal of these barriers significantly enhanced economic, social, and cultural exchanges, further intertwining the Baltic states with the broader European community. Moreover, their adoption of the euro exemplifies their deepening integration into the European Union. Estonia led the way by adopting the euro in 2011, followed by Latvia in 2014, and Lithuania in 2015.⁹ This transition to the common European currency was more than an economic adjustment: it was a strategic move, which reinforced financial stability, facilitated cross-border trade, and aligned these economies more closely with the Eurozone. The euro adoption also underscored their commitment to the EU's economic framework, providing a foundation for sustainable growth and making these countries more attractive to foreign investment.

In addition to their economic integration, the Baltic states have played active roles within EU's governance structures, exemplified by their respective presidencies of the Council of the European Union. Lithuania was the first to assume the Council's presidency in 2013, when it prioritised crucial issues such as energy security, Eastern Partnership initiatives, and the stabilisation of the EU's economic policies.¹⁰ Latvia, in its turn, held the Council's presidency in the first half of 2015, a period marked by significant geopolitical challenges. During its presidency, Latvia played a crucial role in guiding the EU's foreign and defence policies, reflecting its growing influence and

⁴Deloy, C., and Levy, H., (2003). "Referendum on the European Union in Latvia", *Robert Schuman Foundation*, September 20. Available at: <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/224-referendum-on-the-european-union-in-latvia-september-20th-2003>.

⁵DW, (2003). "Estonians Say 'Jah' to the EU", September 15. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/estonians-say-jah-to-the-eu/a-967912>.

⁶Voice of America, (2003). "Lithuanian Referendum on EU Membership Under Way – 2003 – 05 – 10". Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2003-05-10-11-lithuanian-66317417/543157.html>.

⁷European Council | Council of the European Union, (2004). "2004 Enlargement: Facts and Figures". Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/2004-enlargement-facts-and-figures/>.

⁸European Commission, (2007). "Background on Schengen Enlargement", MEMO/07/619, p. 3. Available at: https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-07-619_en.htm.

⁹European Commission, (2024). "EU countries and the euro". Available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/euro/eu-countries-and-euro_en.

¹⁰Griguolaite, R., (2019). "Lithuania", *European State Aid Law Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 208-211. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26694324>.

capacity to contribute to the Union's strategic agenda.¹¹ Estonia followed suit with its Council presidency in the second half of 2017, when it placed a strong emphasis on digital innovation, cybersecurity, and the strengthening of the EU's single market. Estonia's focus on digitalisation was particularly noteworthy, as it mirrored the country's own national priorities and its status as a leader in digital governance.¹²

There are two principal factors underlying the Baltic states' steadfast commitment to pro-Europeanism. Firstly, these nations' determination to maintain their independence from Russian influence has been perceived as a clear-cut resolution and has enhanced their consistent support for the EU and NATO for almost two decades.¹³ Secondly, EU membership has delivered substantial economic benefits to the Baltic region in its economic transition.¹⁴ In exchange, the Baltic states have adopted a more confident and proactive stance within the EU, over the past two decades, and now they are also assuming leadership responsibilities, as evidenced by their response to the recent conflict in Ukraine.

This article presents a three-stage model for explaining the EU integration of these small states—*Active Learning*, *Steady Observer*, and *Confident Team Player*. Thus, it introduces several novel and significant elements in the fields of international relations and EU studies, and it offers a new theoretical framework for understanding the long-term integration processes. Our comprehensive, longitudinal analysis of the Baltic states' EU integration covers two decades, and provides critical insights into the evolving strategies of small states within the EU. Moreover, it examines how these three post-Soviet states transitioned from the status of policy-takers to that of policy-shapers within the supranational structures. This new model of analysis highlights the small states' adaptability, explores the long-term effects of EU enlargement, and weighs the influence of historical legacies (e.g., the Soviet past) on the integration strategies. Hence, this article significantly enhances the scholarly understanding of the small states' potential to shape EU policies and structures.

Therefore, the research endeavours have been guided by the need to address two main research questions: How have the Baltic states navigated their three-stage EU integration process over the past two decades, and how does this enrich our understanding of the small states' adaptability within supranational structures?

Literature review

This research seeks to bridge a critical gap in the existing literature on European integration and small state behaviour in supranational frameworks. Extensive research

¹¹Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, (2015). "Progress achieved in the Council during Latvian Presidency". Available at: <https://eu2015.lv>.

¹²Council of the European Union, (2017). "Programme of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 1 July 2017 – 31 December 2017". Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/56237/2017-jul-dec-ee-programme.pdf>.

¹³Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, (2024). "20 years of Latvia's membership of the European Union", March 22. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/20-years-latvias-membership-european-union>.

¹⁴Bukovskis, K., (2022). "The Four Stages of State Rebuilding in the Baltic States Since 1990" in *State-Building, Rule of Law, Good Governance and Human Rights in Post-Soviet Space*, Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003198024-3/four-stages-state-rebuilding-baltic-states-since-1990-karlis-bukovskis>.

has been conducted on the EU enlargement and integration processes, but most of it focuses on larger Member States, or treats small states as undifferentiated entities. Analyses of the distinct challenges the small states-particularly those with a post-Soviet legacy-deal with in their long-term integration journey, and of the strategies they have devised are scarce. Sharing a unique historical and geopolitical context, the Baltic states offer a valuable case study because their policies and strategies have not been thoroughly explored within the framework of a multi-staged integration model. By focusing on a 20-year period of their EU integration, this article highlights how these states have evolved from passive recipients of EU policies to proactive contributors, or policy-shapers, within the EU. The proposed three-stage model of integration captures this dynamic evolution, providing a more nuanced understanding of small state behaviour over time. This approach not only uncovers the specificities of the post-Soviet states' adaptation to the EU context, but also enriches the scholarly literature on European integration.

The Baltic states' integration into the EU has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, particularly due to their post-Soviet status. Works by Galbreath and Lamoreaux (2008),¹⁵ Mole (2012),¹⁶ and Van Elsuwege (2008)¹⁷ have explored the geopolitical and security dimensions of the Baltic states' integration journey, emphasising their dual objectives of consolidating democracy and securing protection from external threats, particularly from Russia. Berg and Ehin (2009)¹⁸ examine in depth how Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have navigated the EU accession process, focusing on their adaptation to the Copenhagen criteria and to the EU's governance standards. The authors highlight the importance of the Baltic states' strategic identity construction, which implied their framing as European, both culturally and politically, to accelerate their acceptance into the EU. Additionally, Nello (2012) analyses the economic dimension of the Baltics' EU integration, exploring how they tailored their economies to the EU's market dynamics and competitive pressures, through structural reforms and the adoption of EU economic regulations, which facilitated their integration into the single market.

However, the existing studies on these small states with post-Soviet legacies focus more on the accession phase or the early years of their EU membership. Not much attention is given to the constant evolution of their strategies that go beyond the initial adaptation to EU norms. This article seeks to fill this gap by providing a longitudinal analysis of the Baltic states' integration over two decades. At the same time, it offers a new model for understanding their increasing role within the EU.

¹⁵Lamoreaux, J.W., and Galbreath, D.J. (2008). "The Baltic States As 'Small States': Negotiating The 'East' By Engaging The 'West'". *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 39, Issue 1, pp. 1-14. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01629770801908697>.

¹⁶Mole, R., (2012). *The Baltic States from the Soviet Union to the European Union: Identity, Discourse and Power in the Post-Communist Transition of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, London, Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203121498/baltic-states-soviet-union-european-union-richard-mole>.

¹⁷Elsuwege, P.V., (2008). "From Soviet Republics to EU Member States: A legal and political assessment of the Baltic States' Accession to the EU", Brill. Available at: <https://www.europeansources.info/record/from-soviet-republics-to-eu-member-states-a-legal-and-political-assessment-of-the-baltic-states-accession-to-the-eu/>.

¹⁸Ehin, P., and Berg, E. (eds.), (2009). *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Identity-and-Foreign-Policy-Baltic-Russian-Relations-and-European-Integration/Berg-Ehin/p/book/9780754673293>.

Methodology

For this paper we have employed a qualitative approach, and we have conducted a comparative case study to juxtapose and analyse the long-term European integration strategies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Our research carried out in a multi-method framework, combines historical aspects, policy and content analysis (of key policy documents, official statements, EU-level communications, government reports, and legislative changes from 2004 to 2024, publications from prominent think tank, etc.) with quantitative data to enable a comprehensive understanding of the Baltics' evolving roles in the EU.

Think tank reports have been selected based on their relevance to the Baltic states' EU policies and their impact on the public discourse and policy formulation. Special attention has been given to publications that address the small states' behaviour in supranational structures, or tackle the geopolitical challenges faced by post-Soviet EU members. To support the qualitative findings, the study integrates quantitative analysis of economic and social indicators. Data from Eurostat, the World Bank, and national statistical offices is used to assess the progress of the Baltic states in terms of GDP growth, unemployment rates, foreign direct investment, and social welfare indicators. These metrics provide empirical backing to the discussion on how economic and social factors have influenced the Baltics' integration strategies and policy choices.

Thus, we strived to capture the stages of their European integration, key milestones and turning points in their strategic approach to EU membership. A comparative study was necessary to identify the commonalities and divergences in the integration strategies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. By comparing their economic, social, and foreign policy initiatives and reforms, we highlight how these states that share a post-Soviet legacy have adopted different pathways and priorities in their integration processes.

The study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly regarding data availability and the challenges of generalising about small states with a common historical background. While the findings are context-specific, they offer valuable insights for the broader theme of small state behaviour in the EU.

Discussion: Two decades of political transformation: the Baltic states' path through three stages

Compared to the founding countries of the European Union, the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – have taken a distinct path toward EU membership, influenced by their unique geopolitical and historical contexts. Their integration journey can be delineated into three distinct phases: the *Active Learning Phase* (1991-2006), the *Steady Observer Phase* (2006-2013), and the *Confident Team Player Phase* (from 2013 onwards).

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991,¹⁹ the Baltic states endeavoured to establish themselves as independent European entities. This transition involved substantial efforts to align with EU standards, requiring extensive reforms across their economies, legal frameworks, and governance structures. For instance, in 1992, Estonia adopted a new constitution²⁰ that underscored democratic principles and the rule of law. Additionally, the introduction of a flat tax system in 2000²¹ was pivotal in simplifying its tax regime and attracting foreign investment. Latvia implemented significant legal and economic reforms. From among these, it is worth mentioning the enactment of the Law on the Protection of State Secrets in 2002,²² which is in line with EU norms on data protection and transparency. Similarly, Lithuania's economic reform efforts focused on liberalising its economy and restructuring the banking sector, which included the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and enhancements to the business environment. Throughout this *Active Learning Stage*, all three Baltic states have made notable progress in adopting the EU acquis. This reflected their commitment to upholding EU values, such as democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights.

The subsequent *Steady Observer Phase* (2006-2013) marked a shift in the Baltics' approach. As they advanced towards deeper EU integration, they began to critically assess and occasionally diverge from certain EU policies. Estonia's accession to the Schengen Area in 2007 was a significant milestone, facilitating border-free travel within the EU and demonstrating its compliance with EU standards on border management and security.²³ During the 2015 European migration crisis, Latvia's stance was characterised by cautious engagement. Latvian Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma initially opposed the EU's refugee quota system, due to domestic concerns about the migration's impact on national security and social cohesion, concerns fuelled by the historical grievances about forced migration under Soviet rule.²⁴ Public sentiment in Latvia was largely against accepting refugees, with surveys indicating that a significant majority of Latvians believed their country should not admit refugees at all. This reluctance, rooted in the historical narratives depicting the mass migrations and deportations experienced during the Soviet era, has generated a cautious attitude towards new waves of migration. In the end, Latvia agreed to accept 531 refugees from Italy and Greece within two years, but insisted that participation in the EU's relocation efforts should be voluntary. Thus, it emphasised each country's right to make its own decisions regarding refugee intake.²⁵ Similarly, Lithuania has adopted a prudent stance,

¹⁹Graney, K., (2019). "The Baltic States: 'Successful Return to Europe'" in *Russia, the Former Soviet Republics, and Europe Since 1989: Transformation and Tragedy*, online edn. Oxford Academic, pg. 175. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/book/32447/chapter-abstract/268793067?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 178.

²¹Funke, M., and Strulik, H., (2003). "Taxation, growth and welfare: Dynamic effects of Estonia's 2000 income tax act", BOFIT Discussion Papers, No. 10, *Bank of Finland, Institute for Economics in Transition (BOFIT)*, Helsinki, pg. 8. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/212524/1/bofit-dp2003-010.pdf>.

²²EUR-Lex, (2002). "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria), Latvia profile". Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/LV/ALL/?uri=legisum:e22104>.

²³EU Monitor, (2010). "Schengen: some basic facts". Available at: https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gvxp/vik6henf9fyv?ctx=vh7douwe0cp7&start_tab0=375.

²⁴Latvian Public Broadcasting, (2015). "Latvia and the refugee crisis: a primer", *Eng.LSM.lv*, October 19. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/features/latvia-and-the-refugee-crisis-a-primer.a150836/>.

²⁵European Commission|European Website on Integration, (2024). "Governance of migrant integration in Latvia". Available at: https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-latvia_en.

participating in discussions about the European Union's collective response, while expressing concerns about the social implications of increased migration. The country was initially reluctant to accept its share of refugees, as proposed by the EU, and criticised the quotas assigned to it. Lithuania was asked to accept 1,105 refugees, but managed to take in only about half of that number.²⁶ Lithuania's approach was characterised by a focus on border security and the implications of migration on national stability. The government was particularly concerned about the potential social impacts of integrating refugees. Those concerns led to a preference for restrictive measures rather than proactive integration policies. This prudent approach was evident in the political discourse, wherein officials highlighted fears over the long-term effects of migration on the Lithuanian society. Subsequently, public policy views have intensified these apprehensions and, in July 2021, Latvia and Lithuania declared a state of emergency due to a significant influx of migrants (primarily from Iraq, but also from other countries) crossing their border with Belarus. Their decision was influenced by the belief that the Belarusian government was orchestrating these movements as a form of hybrid warfare against the Baltics.²⁷ Overall, the Steady Observer Phase illustrated the transition from active implementation of EU reforms to a more evaluative and sometimes critical stance on EU policies, driven by the Baltic states' strategic positioning and historical experiences.

From 2013 onwards, the Baltics have demonstrated increased confidence and influence within the EU, especially when they assumed the Presidency of the EU Council, which marked their transition to the *Confident Team Player Phase* and left a distinct mark on EU policy. Lithuania's 2013 Presidency – focused on energy security and the Eastern Partnership – led to significant progress on the Energy Union initiative, and strengthened ties with the Eastern European nations. A key deliverable was the advancement of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which laid the groundwork for closer political and economic relations.²⁸ Latvia's 2015 Presidency was instrumental in shaping the EU's digital future. Its most notable achievement was its crucial contribution to the negotiations on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This landmark legislation, enacted in 2016 and implemented in 2018, has fundamentally altered data protection practices across the EU and globally. Latvia has also pushed forward the Digital Single Market strategy, setting the stage for increased digital integration of the Member States. Moreover, during its Presidency, Latvia has successfully negotiated a provisional deal to eliminate mobile phone roaming fees within the EU, enhancing connectivity for travellers across Member States.²⁹ Estonia's 2017 Presidency further cemented the Baltics' reputation as digital pioneers, with the Tallinn Digital Summit serving as a platform to advance EU-wide digital policies. Estonia's 'digital by default' principle has influenced the EU governance, promoting e-solutions

²⁶Benas Gerdžiūnas, (2023). "Fences, detentions, pushbacks – five questions about Lithuania's migration crisis answered". *LRT.lt*. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2018482/fences-detentions-pushbacks-five-questions-about-lithuania-s-migration-crisis-answered>.

²⁷Human Rights Monitoring Institute, (2021). "Lithuania's Response to the Migrant Crisis: Milling About in Confusion, Curtailing Human Rights, and Building a Wall", *Liberties.eu*, August 12. Available at: <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/lithuania-migrant-crisis/43723>.

²⁸European Commission, (2013). "FACTSHEET Eastern Partnership summit Vilnius, 28-29 November 2013", MEMO/13/1057, Brussels, November 26. Available at: https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-1057_en.htm.

²⁹Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *op.cit*.

in public services and cross-border cooperation. Concrete outcomes included progress on the free movement of non-personal data and enhanced cybersecurity measures.³⁰ Collectively, the Baltic presidencies of the Council of the European Union have highlighted the region's ability to drive the EU agenda-setting process, particularly in digital innovation, data protection, and energy security. Thus, they have demonstrated that smaller Member States can shape the Union's future direction.

In the Baltic states, the institutional Euroscepticism, though relatively mild compared to that in Hungary or Poland, is present in certain political parties that question aspects of the European integration. In Lithuania, for instance, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŹS), which had a significant political clout during the 2016-2020 period, has criticised specific EU policies, especially those related to agricultural regulations and fiscal oversight. Its position reflects a cautious approach to deeper integration, and voices concerns about the EU's sway over national decision-making. In Latvia, the National Alliance (NA), which has been part of several coalition governments, advocates for safeguarding the Latvian identity against what it perceives as external pressures from the EU. Therefore, the NA often pushes for a more intergovernmental approach to EU governance. In Estonia, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) is the most outspoken critic of the EU. EKRE, whose members have held various governmental positions since 2019, often frames its Euroscepticism in terms of national sovereignty. It rejects the idea of EU federalism and advocates for a stronger national control over issues like migration and cultural policies. EKRE's stance aligns with intergovernmentalism, a model in which national governments maintain substantial autonomy and decision-making power within the EU framework, and thus resists the idea of a more centralised European authority. One can observe this cautious intergovernmental stance throughout the Baltic states, where even mainstream parties tend to prioritise national interests and are wary of ceding too much power to Brussels.

Public opinion data from the Baltic states show a generally high level of support for EU membership, but with notable reservations caused by mistrust in the EU institutions. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2023, support for EU membership stood at 82% in Lithuania, 73% in Estonia, and 62% in Latvia.³¹ This strong support is largely driven by economic benefits (e.g., access to the single market and EU structural funds), and security considerations, especially in the face of regional threats from Russia. However, trust in EU institutions has significantly dropped. In the same survey, trust in the European Commission was only 45% in Lithuania, 48% in Estonia, and 42% in Latvia. These low percentages reflect concerns about the EU's decision-making processes and its capacity to take heed of local needs.³² In Latvia and Estonia, Euroscepticism is more pronounced among the Russian-speaking minorities,

³⁰Politico, (2017). "Estonia's presidency: How it went", December 20. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/estonias-presidency-how-it-went/>.

³¹European Commission, (2023). "Standard Eurobarometer Survey 2023: Support for EU Membership in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia". Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3152>. European Commission, (2023). "Eurobarometer Survey: Winter 2022-2023 Results". Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872>. Buras, P., and Morina, E., (2023). "Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 23. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu/>.

³²*Ibid.*

which make up about 25% and 30% of the population, respectively.³³ Many members of these communities feel marginalised by the EU policies, primarily in terms of language, laws, and socio-economic disparities. These dissatisfactions result in higher levels of Euroscepticism within these groups. Notwithstanding these challenges, there is a broad public support for EU membership, as the perceived benefits, mainly in terms of security and economic development, continue to outweigh the criticisms.

Over the last decade, the political landscape in the Baltic states has further evolved, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities brought by EU membership. Despite a rise in scepticism about certain EU initiatives (mostly, those regarding migration and fiscal policies), the Baltic states continue to prioritise their role within the EU framework. Their commitment is evident in the collaborative efforts on security issues, particularly in light of the regional tensions with Russia, which call for a cohesive EU foreign policy. Collectively, the Baltic states have shown a strong interest in the EU's Eastern Partnership programme, designed to foster closer political and economic ties with six Eastern European neighbours. Their advocacy for reforms in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia underscores a shared commitment to democratic values and stability in a region crucial – in terms of security – to both the EU and the Baltics. Additionally, the Baltic states' engagement with Central Asia highlights their ambitions to diversify geopolitical relationships and extend trade ties beyond Europe. This collaboration includes discussions about educational exchange programmes and trade agreements—prospects that converge with the EU's broader aspirations to build partnerships with the emerging markets. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Baltic states have emerged as formidable advocates for a robust and unified EU foreign policy. They have taken a leading stance in condemning the Russian aggression. In this sense, one can say that the Baltic states not only shape the EU's foreign policy, but also foster greater solidarity among Member States, and reinforce the EU's commitment to democratic principles and collective security.

From transition to convergence: the economic evolution of the Baltic states since EU accession

In the early 1990s, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania faced the formidable task of shifting from centrally planned economies to market-driven systems.³⁴

Latvia, like its Baltic neighbours, has dealt with severe economic challenges after regaining independence in 1991. The country's GDP contracted significantly, falling by approximately 50% between 1990 and 1993, as Latvia transitioned from a centralised economy to a market-oriented system.³⁵ Hyperinflation was a critical issue, i.e. inflation peaked at around 950% in 1992, due to the collapse of the Soviet economic structure and the initial difficulties in establishing a new and stable economic

³³Askew, J., (2024). "From gains to grumbles: Euroscepticism in the Baltic states", *Euronews*, March 4. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2024/03/04/from-gains-to-grumbles-euroscepticism-in-the-baltic-states>.

³⁴Knöbl, A., and Haas, R., (2003). "IMF and the Baltics: A Decade of Cooperation", IMF Working Paper 03/241, *International Monetary Fund*. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2003/wp03241.pdf>.

³⁵Bitāns, M., and Purviņš V., (2012). "The development of Latvia's Economy 1990-2004", in *The Bank of Latvia XC*, November 23, pg. 141. Available at: https://www.bank.lv/images/stories/pielikumi/publikacijas/citaspublikacijas/Bitans_Purvins_EN.pdf.

framework.³⁶ Subsequently, Latvia has implemented several key reforms and measures to stabilise its economy: rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises, introduction of a new currency (the Latvian lats) in 1993, the liberalisation of trade and investment policies.³⁷ These measures have been successful in bringing inflation under control, with rates dropping significantly by the mid-1990s, when Latvia's economy began to recover, with GDP growth averaging about 5-7% annually between 1995 and 2000.³⁸ Latvia has focused on diversifying its economy, by placing significant emphasis on the development of the services sector (particularly, financial services, transportation, and logistics) and of the manufacturing sector (especially, wood products, textiles, and food processing). Foreign direct investments (FDIs) have become increasingly important, growing from relatively low levels in the early 1990s to over \$350 million by 2003.³⁹ During its preparations for EU membership, Latvia has undertaken extensive reforms to align its economy with EU standards. These included modernising the legal and regulatory frameworks, enhancing the infrastructure, and improving transparency in business practices.⁴⁰ Latvia's strategic focus on developing its service industries, especially finance and transportation, has played a key role in building a more resilient and diversified economy, and has paved the way for sustained growth in the years following its EU accession.

Lithuania has also experienced severe economic contractions after regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. The country's GDP fell by approximately 40% from 1990 to 1994, reflecting the difficulties of the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system.⁴¹ Hyperinflation was a significant issue, peaking at around 1,163% in 1992, as the country struggled to stabilise its economy amid the collapse of the Soviet economic structure.⁴² Despite these challenges, Lithuania has managed to stabilise its economy through a series of reforms, including large-scale privatisation, the introduction of a new currency (i.e., the litas) in 1993, and the establishment of a legal framework to support business activities. By 1995, inflation had dropped to more manageable levels, and the GDP resumed its annual growth with about 5-6% on average between 1995 and 2000.⁴³ Lithuania has diversified its economy, by stimulating the development of its manufacturing sector (particularly, machinery, electronics, and textiles), while also harnessing its agricultural potential. The country's journey to EU membership had required the adoption of EU standards, which involved liberalising trade, enhancing regulatory frameworks, and modernising infrastructure. During that period, Lithuania had focused on reducing government intervention, fostering private sector growth, and attracting FDIs. FDI inflows increased significantly

³⁶*Ibid.*, pg. 142.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pg. 143.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp.146-147.

³⁹Zile, R., and Steinbuka, I., (2001). "Latvia on the Way to the European Union", *Finance & Development*, Vol. 38, No. 2. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2001/06/zile.htm>.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹European Commission| Government of the Republic of Lithuania, (2000). "Joint Assessment of Lithuania's Economic Policy Priorities", Vilnius, May 29. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/pages/publication2957_en.pdf.

⁴²International Monetary Fund, (1996). "Lithuania – Recent Economic Developments", August 26. Available at: <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/1996/072/article-A001-en.xml>.

⁴³European Commission, | Government of the Republic of Lithuania, *op.cit.*

from around \$30 million in 1995 to over \$800 million by 2003.⁴⁴ The strategic economic policies helped attract substantial foreign investment, bolstering Lithuania's industrial base and aligning its agricultural sector with EU standards.

Estonia, just like the other two Baltic states, has faced significant economic challenges following its independence in 1991. Between 1990 and 1994, its GDP contracted by approximately 35%, due to the difficult transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system.⁴⁵ Inflation was a major issue, peaking at around 1,000% in 1992 due to the collapse of the Soviet economic system and the introduction of market prices.⁴⁶ To stabilise its economy, Estonia has implemented several measures and key reforms: rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the establishment of a currency board system to peg the Estonian kroon to the Deutsche Mark, and the opening of the economy to trade and investment.⁴⁷ These policies have helped bring inflation under control, with rates falling dramatically by the mid-1990s. By the second half of the 1990s, Estonia's economy had begun to recover, with GDP growth averaging around 5-6% annually between 1995 and 2000.⁴⁸ Due to its strong focus on information technology and digital innovation, Estonia has earned a reputation as one of Europe's most digitally advanced countries. It also worked to create a favourable environment for FDI, which grew significantly from negligible levels in the early 1990s to over \$900 million by 2003.⁴⁹ In preparation for EU membership, Estonia undertook extensive reforms to align its economy with EU standards. In doing so, it modernised its regulatory and legal frameworks. Thanks to its emphasis on digital governance and innovation, Estonia has positioned itself as a global leader in e-government and cybersecurity.

After joining the EU in 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were often referred to as the "Baltic Tigers" due to their rapid economic growth.⁵⁰ Between 2000 and 2007, the Baltic states experienced some of the fastest GDP growth rates in the EU: annual GDP growth rates exceeded 7% at their peak in all three countries.⁵¹ The total trade has increased nearly 300% during this time period between the years 1999-2007.⁵² Estonia, for instance, saw its GDP per capita rise from approximately \$5,200 in 2000 to over \$16,000 by 2007.⁵³ Similarly, Latvia and Lithuania enjoyed significant growth, with

⁴⁴International Monetary Fund, (1996), *op. cit.*

⁴⁵Gasparini, A., (2021), "From State and Market: Thirty Years of Economic Success in Estonia", *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, June 8. Available at: <https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/state-market-thirty-years-economic-success-estonia>.

⁴⁶Köll A. M., (2024). *Reinterpretation of economic history in the Baltic countries, 30 years after independence*. Taylor & Francis. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2024.2314304>

⁴⁷Gasparini, A., *op. cit.*

⁴⁸Laar, M., (2007). "The Estonian Economic Miracle", *The Heritage Foundation*, August 7. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/report/the-estonian-economic-miracle>.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Åslund, A., (2015). "The Baltic Tigers: Past, Present and Future", *CESifo Forum* 4/2015, December, pg. 3. Available at: <https://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/forum-2015-4-aslund-baltic-tiger-december.pdf>.

⁵¹Lamberg, S., and Vålming, S., (2008). "The Rise of the Baltic Tigers". Available at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:220299/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

⁵²Åslund, A., (2015), "The Baltic Tiger: A Decade of Rapid Economic Growth", pg. 46. Available at: <https://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/forum-2015-4-aslund-baltic-tiger-december.pdf>.

⁵³Macrotrends. "Estonia GDP Per Capita 1993-2024". Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/EST/estonia/gdp-per-capita>.

GDP per capita increasing from \$3,500 (in 2000) to around \$13,500 by 2007 in Latvia, and from \$4,000 to \$14,000⁵⁴ in Lithuania in the same period.

The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 exposed significant vulnerabilities in the Baltic economies, with each country facing distinct challenges. Estonia's economy contracted sharply, and the GDP dropped by 14.7% in 2009.⁵⁵ However, Estonia's prudent fiscal policies and low public debt have facilitated a relatively swift recovery. The country maintained a balanced budget throughout the crisis, and by 2011, it had returned to GDP growth, showcasing its resilience and commitment to fiscal discipline.⁵⁶ Latvia experienced one of the deepest recessions in the European Union, with its GDP contracting by 14.4% in 2009.⁵⁷ The Latvian government has responded with stringent austerity measures, including significant cuts to public sector wages, tax increases, and reductions in social spending. While these measures successfully restored fiscal stability and allowed Latvia to adopt the euro in 2014, they also led to significant social challenges, such as increased emigration, particularly among the young, skilled workers.⁵⁸ This outflow has contributed to ongoing demographic issues: e.g., an aging population, labour shortages in rural areas, etc. In its turn, Lithuania faced a severe economic downturn, and its GDP contracted by 14.8% in 2009. Unemployment surged to nearly 18%, and the banking sector faced considerable liquidity challenges.⁵⁹ In response, the Lithuanian government has implemented decisive austerity measures, including cuts to public sector wages and pensions, along with structural reforms aimed at enhancing the economic resilience. By 2011, Lithuania's economy had rebounded, with its GDP growing by approximately 6%.⁶⁰ This recovery underscored Lithuania's ability to adhere to EU fiscal norms and maintain macroeconomic stability.

Despite the relatively swift economic recovery across the Baltic states, the crisis has had lasting repercussions, mostly in terms of regional and social inequalities. In Latvia, significant economic disparities have persisted between urban centres, like Riga, and rural areas. They have exacerbated social challenges, such as unemployment and depopulation, in less developed regions. The emigration of the young skilled workers creates demographic imbalances, characterised by aging populations and labour force shortages in rural areas.⁶¹ These issues highlight the current need for more inclusive growth strategies that address the uneven distribution of economic benefits and ensure

⁵⁴Macrotrends. "Lithuania GDP Per Capita 1995-2024". Available at <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/LTU/lithuania/gdp-per-capita>.

⁵⁵Macrotrends. "Estonia GDP Per Capita 1993-2024". Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/EST/estonia/gdp-per-capita>.

⁵⁶Åslund, A., (2015). "The Baltic Tigers: Past, Present and Future", *op. cit.*, pg. 7.

⁵⁷Staehr, K., (2015). "Economic Growth and Convergence in the Baltic States: Caught in a Middle-Income Trap?", *Intereconomics*, Vol. 50, No. 5. Available at: <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2015/number/5/article/economic-growth-and-convergence-in-the-baltic-states-caught-in-a-middle-income-trap.html>.

⁵⁸European Commission, (2015), "Economic Growth and Convergence in the Baltic States: Caught in a Middle Income Trap?" DG ECFIN, pp. 1-6. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/events/2015/20150616_vilnius/paper_baltic_states_en.pdf.

⁵⁹Åslund, A., (2015), "The Baltic Tiger: A Decade of Rapid Economic Growth", pg. 7. <https://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/forum-2015-4-aslund-baltic-tiger-december.pdf>.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pg. 7.

⁶¹European Commission, (2015), "Economic Growth and Convergence in the Baltic States: Caught in a Middle Income Trap?", pp. 9-12. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/events/2015/20150616_vilnius/paper_baltic_states_en.pdf.

the long-term social and economic stability across the Baltic region. The adoption of the euro by Estonia in 2011, by Latvia in 2014, and by Lithuania in 2015 marked a significant milestone for all three Baltic states— and facilitated their further economic integration with the EU.⁶² The euro transition has reduced currency exchange risks, has lowered interest rates, and has increased price transparency, boosting economic stability and investor confidence.

Each Baltic state has focused on different economic sectors, leveraging its unique strengths. Estonia has prioritised becoming a digital economy, with significant investments in information technology, cybersecurity, and e-services. Initiatives like the "e-Residency" programme have attracted global tech start-ups, contributing to a dynamic start-up ecosystem that includes success stories like Skype and TransferWise.⁶³ Estonia's emphasis on technological innovation has led to improvements in productivity and business efficiency, positioning it as a hub for foreign investment. The country's economy has significantly changed since joining the EU: its GDP per capita increased from approximately €5,300 in 2004 to over €26,000 by 2023,⁶⁴ reflecting substantial economic growth and convergence with EU averages. Estonia ranks highly in the ease of doing business and innovation indices, due to its strong focus on digital transformation and a favourable business environment. As of 2023, Estonia's GDP growth rate was around 2.8%, and the unemployment had decreased to 5.7%, indicating a resilient and diversified economy.⁶⁵ The country has also made significant investments in renewable energy, particularly in wind and solar power, further diversifying its economic base and enhancing its competitiveness within the EU. Estonia's strategic focus on digital innovation and technological advancements has led to rising living standards and sustained economic vitality.

Latvia has developed a robust financial sector and has leveraged its strategic location as a logistics hub between Europe and Russia. The country has seen substantial growth in industries such as wood processing, food production, and transport services, benefiting from its geographical position. However, the banking sector has faced regulatory challenges, necessitating reforms to address issues related to non-resident banking and financial transparency. Latvia's manufacturing industry has also expanded, driven by a surge in EU's export demand. Notwithstanding these successes, economic disparities between urban and rural areas persist, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to ensure inclusive growth. Latvia's GDP per capita as a percentage of the EU average has risen from 47% in 2004 to around 72% by 2021, demonstrating a significant improvement in living standards and economic performance. The country has also seen a notable increase in its openness to trade, with

⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.

⁶³O'Dwyer, G., (2022). "Estonia: Digital Economy Drives Growth", *Global Finance Magazine*, July 22. Available at: <https://gfmag.com/emerging-frontier-markets/estonia-digital-economy-drives-growth/>.

⁶⁴European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, (2024). "Transition Report 2023-24: Transitions big and small". Available at: <https://www.ebrd.com/documents/occe/transition-report-202324-central-europe-and-the-baltic-states-pdf.pdf>.

⁶⁵Nortal, (2022). "The key ingredients to Estonia's success as a leading digital society", September 12. Available at: <https://nortal.com/insights/the-key-ingredients-to-estonias-success-as-a-leading-digital-society/>.

exports constituting about 60% of GDP, up from 40% prior to EU membership.⁶⁶ The country ranks well in the ease of doing business index, supported by ongoing reforms aimed at improving the business environment and attracting foreign investments. As of 2023, unemployment had fallen to 6.0%, owing to a robust and increasingly diversified economy.⁶⁷ Latvia's balanced approach to economic development, with an emphasis on exports, logistics, and financial services, has led to improved living standards and a resilient economic foundation. Lithuania has capitalised on its manufacturing base and agricultural potential, and has recorded significant growth in machinery, electronics, and food processing. Lithuania's economy has been notably transformed since joining the EU, with GDP per capita increasing from €5,500 in 2004 to over €22,000 by 2023,⁶⁸ which reflected the substantial economic growth and the convergence with EU averages. The country ranks highly in the ease of doing business and innovation indices, with a burgeoning tech sector and a strong export performance. As of 2023, Lithuania's GDP growth rate was around -0.3%, and the unemployment had fallen to 6.9%, indicating a robust and diversified economy.⁶⁹ The country has also invested in renewable energy and biotechnology, diversifying its economic base and enhancing its competitiveness within the EU. Lithuania's multifaceted approach has led to an increase in exports and GDP per capita, reflecting rising living standards and economic vitality.

The integration of the Baltic states into the EU has enabled their active participation in EU's broader economic frameworks. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have all played roles in shaping EU policies, particularly in digitalisation, where Estonia has been a leader. Their participation in EU regional initiatives, such as the Baltic Sea Strategy, has facilitated cooperation in areas like environmental protection, transport, and innovation. Additionally, the geopolitical context has fundamentally influenced the economic strategies of the Baltic states. Due to their proximity to Russia and the ensuing historical ties, over 15% of their exports were going to Russia before 2014.⁷⁰ However, since Russia's annexation of Crimea and especially following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, these countries have pivoted sharply. Energy independence has been a priority, leading to the establishment of Lithuania's Klaipėda LNG terminal in 2014, now meeting 100% of its gas needs. Furthermore, the Baltic electricity grids are on track to synchronise with the EU's network by 2025, ending reliance on Russian systems.⁷¹ Regional cooperation has deepened. The Rail Baltica project aims to connect the Baltics to the European rail networks by 2030 and thus enhance trade and security. This project has received substantial funding from the EU, with the

⁶⁶Public Broadcasting of Latvia, (2023). "Latvia's GDP per capita at about three-quarters of EU average", *Eng.LSM.lv*, March 23. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/23.03.2023-latvias-gdp-per-capita-at-about-three-quarters-of-eu-average.a502074/>.

⁶⁷Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, (2023). "Latvian Economy Overview". Available at: <https://investinlatvia.org/en/useful-information/why-invest/economy>.

⁶⁸Macrotrends, (2024). "Lithuania GDP Per Capita 1995-2024". Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/LTU/lithuania/gdp-per-capita>.

⁶⁹Statista, (2024). "Lithuania: Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in current prices from 1999 to 2029". Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/541498/gross-domestic-product-gdp-per-capita-in-lithuania/>.

⁷⁰LSM.lv, (2024). "Latvian companies doing business with Russia named and shamed", April 5. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/business/05.04.2024-latvian-companies-doing-business-with-russia-named-and-shamed.a549339>.

⁷¹Swedbank Research, (2022). "Macro Focus: The Baltics and Russia – how strong are economic ties?", February 14. Available at: https://www.swedbank-research.com/english/macro_focus/2022/22-02-01/2/index.csp.

European Commission allocating €720 million through the CEF programme in 2020.⁷² These strategic shifts represent a comprehensive response to the evolving geopolitical landscape that has encouraged the reduction of the economic and energy dependencies on the Russian Federation.

Comparatively, the economic performances of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania within the EU context have been commendable, but not without disparities. Estonia, with its strong digital economy, has seen faster GDP growth and higher levels of foreign investment compared to its neighbours. Lithuania's diversified industrial base has allowed it to maintain a steady growth trajectory, while Latvia, despite its advances in financial services, has struggled with slower growth and higher social inequality. These differences highlight the varying degrees of success in economic strategies and underscore the importance of tailored approaches to national development. Nevertheless, in 2022, the combined GDP of the Baltic states reached approximately €115 billion (with Estonia contributing about €31 billion, Latvia €34 billion, and Lithuania €50 billion),⁷³ showcasing their economic resilience and growth. Furthermore, over the last decade, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have consistently ranked among the top countries in the EU for digital innovation. Estonia is recognised as a global leader in e-governance and digital services, boasting a staggering 99% of its public services available online.⁷⁴ Collectively, the Baltic states have increased their defence spending to an average of 2.5% of their GDP in response to regional security concerns.⁷⁵ As their influence continues to expand, it is anticipated that these nations will play an increasingly pivotal role in shaping security policies and in fostering European stability in the coming years.

EU funding and structural support have been essential in the economic transformation of the Baltic states. Allocations from the Cohesion Funds, the European Regional Development Fund, and other EU financial instruments have enabled these countries to modernise their infrastructure, improve regional connectivity, and support innovation. For example, the EU facilitated significant investments in transportation networks, energy infrastructure, and digital services, which helped to bridge regional disparities and boost overall economic resilience. For the further development of the Baltic states, the strategic use of EU funds will remain critical in addressing ongoing challenges and in seizing new growth opportunities.

The future relationship between the Baltic states and the EU will be crucial in shaping their continued economic development. As the EU moves towards greater economic integration and pursues ambitious goals in areas like climate change and digitalisation, the Baltic states will need to align their national policies with these broader objectives. Their capacity to influence EU policy, particularly in domains where they have expertise (e.g., digital governance, in Estonia's case), will be observed in the way they will leverage their EU membership to drive their own economic agendas.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³ERR News, (2023). "Lithuania's real GDP per capita highest among Baltics in 2022", December 20. Available at: <https://news.err.ee/1609201030/lithuania-s-real-gdp-per-capita-highest-among-baltics-in-2022>.

⁷⁴ERSTE Group Research, (2021). "Baltics Outlook | Recovery in full swing", *CEE Economies Special Report*, June 30. Available at: <https://www.erstegroup.com/en/research/report/en/SR232790>.

⁷⁵Citadele, (2024). "Baltic economic overview 06/2024". Available at: <https://www.citadele.lv/en/support/economic-overview/>.

Continued alignment with EU policies will also ensure access to vital funding and support, which are essential for maintaining economic stability and growth.

Societal transformations in the Baltic states: 20 years of EU membership

Two decades after the 2004 EU accession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, these Baltic states have undergone profound and multifaceted transformations. Known for their multiculturalism, these countries boast some of the most diverse societies in the EU, with significant ethnic minorities: Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Jews, Roma, and others. This diversity, while enriching, also reveals underlying fragility and trauma deeply rooted in a history of political oppression, wars, regime changes, and forced displacement. The historical experiences of these states have left indelible scars, which continue to influence their trajectory within the EU and shape their peoples' collective mindset. Analysing the societal changes over the past twenty years necessitates an examination of the distinct experiences of various generational cohorts: those born during the Soviet era who experienced war and occupation, those who came of age post-independence, and those born during the transitional period leading up to the EU accession. Each cohort exhibits unique perspectives on its country's path within the EU.

Additionally, at the outset of their EU integration, Estonia and Latvia have faced significant challenges regarding stateless minorities, particularly former Soviet citizens who lacked citizenship. This situation has arisen from the Soviet Union's policies that encouraged the settlement of Russian speakers in the Baltic states during and after World War II. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, both countries have implemented restrictive citizenship laws.⁷⁶ In Latvia, the citizenship policy has acknowledged the citizenship of those who had it before the Soviet occupation and of their descendants. As a result, approximately one-third of the population turned out to be “non-citizens”—individuals who do not possess citizenship, but are not considered stateless under national law. This group includes a significant number of ethnic Russians and other minorities who settled in Latvia during the Soviet era.⁷⁷ In Estonia, a similar situation has occurred, and a considerable portion of the population has become stateless or held non-citizen status. By 2012, Estonia had around 94,235 stateless individuals, while Latvia had about 280,759.⁷⁸ These numbers represented a significant percentage of their respective populations at that time: around 6-7% of the population in Estonia and approximately 14% in Latvia lacked citizenship.⁷⁹

The “Soviet generation”, encompassing individuals who have matured under Soviet rule, retains vivid memories of the occupation, of resistance, and of the complexities of life in the Soviet Union. This generation's worldview is profoundly

⁷⁶Regelmann, A.-C., (2014). “Introduction – Minority Participation in Estonia and Latvia”, *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Vol 13, No. 1. Available at: <https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2014/Regelmann.pdf>.

⁷⁷Kuczyńska-Zonik A., (2017). “Non-citizens in Latvia: Is it a Real Problem?”, *Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej [Institute of East-Central Europe]*, Lublin. Available at: <https://journals.ispan.edu.pl/index.php/sn/article/view/sn.1438>.

⁷⁸Croft, J., (2016). “Non-Citizens in Estonia and Latvia: Time for Change in Changing Times?”, in IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2015*, Baden Baden 2016. Available at: <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/15/Croft-en.pdf>.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

shaped by experiences of forced collectivisation, mass deportations, political purges, and the systematic suppression of national identity. For many within this cohort, the Soviet era is not merely a historical period, but a lived reality that continues to influence their perceptions of freedom, sovereignty, and national independence. The Soviet occupation was characterised by intense suffering and resistance, marked by efforts to preserve language, culture, and national consciousness amidst Soviet attempts at erasing them. The clandestine preservation of national traditions, the transmission of forbidden histories, and the participation in underground movements are integral to their collective memory. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the Baltic states in the early 1990s represented a significant moment of triumph and relief for this generation. The EU accession in 2004 was seen not only as an economic or political milestone, but also as a symbolic return to Europe, a repudiation of the Soviet legacy, and a reaffirmation of their place within the European community. For this generation, EU membership represents peace, the protection of their hard-won sovereignty, and a safeguard against any potential resurgence of Russian influence.⁸⁰ However, support for the EU among citizens is moderated by a blend of cautious pragmatism and empirical observation. A notable generational divide emerges in the attitudes towards EU membership: whilst merely a tenth of the youth demographic (aged 15-24) perceives membership unfavourably, this proportion doubles to approximately one-fifth among the senior cohort (aged 65-74).⁸¹ This disparity can be attributed to the older generation's lived experience of geopolitical vicissitudes and acute awareness of the precariousness of national autonomy. Although citizens generally acknowledge the stabilising influence and security guarantees afforded by EU membership, they nonetheless maintain a vigilant stance on the preservation of their sovereign prerogatives and cultural patrimony.

The "transition generation", born in the late 1980s and early 1990s, constitutes a cohort shaped by significant socio-political transformations. Their formative years have coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the restoration of national independence, and the complex processes of economic transition and European Union integration. This generation occupies a distinct temporal and ideological space, since it bridged its Soviet past and its European future by blending the inherent tensions and opportunities of that critical historical juncture. This generation has witnessed the dismantling of Soviet-era institutions and the often arduous restructuring of post-socialist economies, characterised by rapid privatisation, rising unemployment, and social dislocation. Their parents' struggles, coupled with their own efforts to adapt to a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape, have left a lasting imprint on their collective consciousness. For the "transition generation", the European Union has represented both a great opportunity and a considerable challenge. It has offered unparalleled access to education, employment, and mobility across a unified Europe, but simultaneously it has demanded conformity to new legal, economic, and social norms. The representatives of this generation have

⁸⁰European Council | Council of the European Union, (2024). "Enlargement then and now: A geopolitical investment in peace and security – Speech by President Charles Michel for the 20th anniversary of the 2004 EU enlargement", April 29. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/04/29/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-ceremony-for-the-20th-anniversary-of-the-2004-eu-enlargement/>.

⁸¹Austers, A., (2017). "Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Much Ado about Nothing", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, Riga. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/13703.pdf>.

increasingly assumed key leadership positions and have played a pivotal role in driving these reforms, often acting as a link between the past and the future. Nevertheless, their eagerness to embrace the EU's opportunities has been tempered by the complexities of navigating through regulatory compliance, market competition, and the dual-national and European-identity. Consequently, debates about supranationalism and intergovernmentalism have frequently been at the forefront of the political discourse, reflecting the ongoing negotiations between the supporters of sovereignty and those of deeper integration. Despite these tensions, Euroscepticism remains notably low within this cohort,⁸² which largely perceives European integration as essential to future prosperity and security. This generation's advocacy for closer ties with the EU is balanced by a strong commitment to preserving cultural and national identities. Thus, its representatives are some of the most articulate proponents of deeper European integration, while maintaining a nuanced awareness of national distinctiveness.

The EU Generation, born after 2004, has only known life within the European Union. For the members of this generation, the EU is not an aspirational goal but a foundational aspect of their existence. They have grown up with open borders, the euro, and a European identity as norms, not as exceptions. The EU's freedoms and benefits—such as the freedom of movement, education, and professional opportunities across Member States—are seen as inherent rights rather than as achievements of their predecessors. This generation has benefited significantly from EU membership, accessing educational programmes like Erasmus+, which facilitate study abroad, language acquisition, and international networking. In 2022, Estonia had a budget of €12.8 million, supporting 1,300 projects across 1,800 organisations, with 7,000 participants in mobility activities.⁸³ Latvia's budget was €10.2 million, funding 1,200 projects involving 1,600 organisations and 6,000 mobility participants. Lithuania had the highest budget at €15.4 million, backing 1,600 projects with 2,200 organisations and 9,000 mobility participants.⁸⁴ These countries also have high tertiary education rates, with Lithuania leading at 31.6%, followed by Estonia at 29.7%, and Latvia at 22.5%.⁸⁵ They have entered a labour market integrated into the European economy, offering career opportunities previously unimaginable. Additionally, EU funding and investment have supported infrastructure modernisation, cultural revitalisation, and have improved living standards. However, the EU Generation faces distinct challenges. There is no need for it to undergo a transformation. The cosmopolitan ideas and beliefs are common among the younger generation, who thinks matters are good as they are, without experiencing tensions between local identities and broader European ideals.

The rapid pace of change, brought by the EU accession, has triggered significant opportunities and considerable strains, highlighting the paradoxes in the Baltic states' transformation. To be more precise, though EU membership has spurred economic development, has modernised infrastructure, and has improved living standards, these benefits have not been evenly distributed. Urban centres have experienced a renaissance with thriving industries and cultural initiatives, but in rural areas the

⁸² Askew, J., *op. cit.*

⁸³ European Commission, (2024). *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*. Available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-organisations/learning-mobility-of-individuals/school-education>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

traditional industries have declined, and the older generations struggling to adapt often feel marginalised. This divide between urban prosperity and rural stagnation contributes to social tensions and challenges the societal cohesion.

Despite broad support for EU membership, there remains a persistent “understanding gap” regarding EU governance and the implications of deeper integration, especially among the older and rural populations, who often perceive Brussels as a distant bureaucracy disconnected from local concerns. This perception fosters scepticism and complicates efforts towards deeper integration. Although public education efforts continue, few people understand the complexities of the EU decision-making, and the rapid political changes exacerbate this state of affairs. The swift integration process, coupled with an already fragile societal situation, has led to a sense of exhaustion among various social groups. Many citizens (particularly those born before the EU accession), who benefit from the single market’s goods and services, struggle to fully comprehend the EU’s essence. Lingering memories of the Soviet era further obstruct this understanding, and the tendency is amplified by the Kremlin’s propaganda and the historical grievances, which polarise vulnerable groups and foster simplistic dichotomies between the West and Russia. This often results in a narrow perception of the EU as a bureaucratic entity rather than as a transformative force. In contrast, the post-EU accession generation views EU membership as an opportunity for value-driven progress and innovation. Therefore, one can say there is a major generational divide in terms of perspectives on European integration.

Conclusion

The past two decades have marked a period of profound transformation for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as they transitioned from post-Soviet states to fully integrated members of the European Union. This transformation is not merely an economic one, but also encompasses the deeply intertwined social and political evolutions that shaped the distinct historical experiences of the three aforementioned generations.

The early 1990s were a period of great changes as these Baltic states rebuilt their political institutions and aligned themselves with Western democratic norms. Their EU accession in 2004 marked a significant milestone, i.e. it symbolised their reintegration into Europe and their commitment to democratic values. Joining the European Union not only consolidated their political stability, but also enhanced their position and role on the European stage. Despite challenges, such as regional disparities and ethnic tensions, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Their ongoing engagement with EU institutions and utmost commitment to democratic principles indicate that they have successfully navigated the post-Soviet transition to integrate into the broader European community.

In the early 1990s, the Baltic states faced formidable challenges as they moved from centrally planned economies to market-oriented systems. The economic turbulence of that period was characterised by significant GDP contractions, hyperinflation, and a complex restructuring of state assets. Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have undertaken substantial reforms—including rapid privatisation, the introduction of new currencies, and the liberalisation of trade policies—to stabilise their economies. These initial

measures have been instrumental in setting the stage for future growth and have placed these nations on a trajectory of rapid economic development after their 2004 EU accession. The following years saw the Baltic states earn the moniker “Baltic Tigers” due to their impressive economic performance, characterised by high growth rates and significant improvements in living standards. However, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 posed a severe test to their economic resilience. The sharp declines in GDP and the consequent implementation of austerity measures underscored the vulnerabilities within their economies. Nevertheless, the relatively swift recovery of these countries highlighted their adaptability and commitment to economic stability. Despite the successes, the crisis left enduring challenges, including regional disparities and social inequalities that continue to influence the socio-economic landscape. The integration into the EU has been pivotal in shaping the contemporary economic and social fabric of the Baltic states. Estonia has emerged as a leader in digital innovation, Latvia has leveraged its strategic geographic position and has developed a robust financial sector, and Lithuania has capitalised on its strengths in manufacturing and agriculture. Notwithstanding these advances, each country faces unique challenges, such as demographic shifts, regional economic disparities, and the need for sustained investment in infrastructure and innovation. EU funding has played a critical role in supporting these countries’ modernisation efforts, by enabling infrastructure improvements and regional development.

The societal changes triggered by the EU integration are equally important. The Baltic states are home to diverse populations, marked by a historical legacy that includes political oppression and forced displacement. The generational divide – between the “Soviet generation”, the “transition generation”, and the “EU generation” – offers a nuanced understanding of how different cohorts perceive their country’s integration into the EU. The Soviet generation views EU membership as a reaffirmation of sovereignty and a safeguard against historical threats. The transition generation, having experienced the shift from Soviet rule to EU integration, tries to strike a balance between the national and the European identity. The members of the EU generation, born after 2004, see EU membership as a foundational aspect of their existence. Yet, they remain critical of EU’s complexities and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

The rapid pace of change has created significant opportunities but also tensions. Urban areas have experienced economic revitalisation, while rural regions face stagnation and socio-economic challenges. The gap in the people’s understanding of the EU governance, particularly among the older and rural populations, has fostered scepticism and hindered deeper integration. Addressing this “understanding gap” is crucial for generating broader support for the EU. These endeavours should also stimulate a more even distribution of the benefits of integration.

In reflecting on the small states’ role within the EU, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania offer a compelling example of how smaller nations can exert proactive influence and contribute meaningfully to the EU’s policies. Their experiences reveal the small states’ potential to shape European policies through innovation, strategic positioning, and active participation. By leveraging their unique strengths – such as Estonia’s leadership in digital governance, Latvia’s strategic logistics capabilities, and Lithuania’s industrial diversification – these countries have demonstrated that even

smaller Member States can drive significant EU-wide initiatives and reforms. The Baltic states' integration story also provides valuable insights for future EU enlargement. Their successful transition from Soviet-era economies to dynamic market-oriented systems illustrates the benefits of a well-managed accession process and the importance of aligning national policies with EU standards. As the EU considers further enlargement, the Baltic states' experiences highlight that the potential new members might contribute positively to the Union, while also facing and overcoming significant challenges.

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