BALTIC ASSEMBLY

I-ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVE ALLOCATION AND MONITORING OF EU STRUCTURAL AND COHESION FUNDS

II-ADVANCING JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE AND LEGAL HARMONIZATION

BESTMUN 25'

Baltic Assembly

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1. Introduction of the Committee

1.1. Baltic Assembly

The Baltic Assembly (BA) is a regional entity that fosters governmental collaboration among Estonia, Latvia and Lithunia. It seeks to identify a shared stance on various global matters, encompassing economic, political, and cultural concerns. The choices of the assembly are recommendations. The budget for the BA is fnanced by the governments of the three members. The languages recognized by the Baltic Assembly are Estonian, Latvian, and Lithunaian. The organization's headquarters and secretariat are situated in Riga, Latvia.

1.1.1. Members

The Baltic Assembly Committee is made up solely of representatives from the trio of Baltic countries- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Every national delegation comprises parliament members, ministersi and high-ranking officials from different government

sectors including justice, finance, and foreign affairs. This framework guarantees an equitable depiction of political viewpoints and national priorities within the area. The members work together with a common dedication to democratic principles, openness, and regional unity, embodying the true structure and aim of the genuie Baltic Assembly.

The Estonian delegation is recognized for its emphasis on digital administration, openness, and civic innovation. Estonia, frequently called Europe's digital leader, places significant focus on modernizing public administration and incorporating technology into anti-corruption strategies. Estonian representatives are anticipated to promote effective EU fund administration systems and regional digital transparency efforts.

The Latvian delegation embodies a nation aiming for equiable governance, social unity, and legal reform. Latvia's political priorities are influenced by the quest for judicial autonomy and reforms against corruption. Delegates from Latvia are expected to highlight the significance of enhancing institutional oversight and fostering collaboration between Baltic accountability agencies.

(unknown, 2025).

1.1.2. Purpose

The Baltic Assembly Committee acts as a forum for promoting dialogue and collaboration amon the three Baltic Nations- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania- to tackle common regional issues through democratic discussion and multilateral cooperation. In the essence of the genuie Baltic Assembly, this committee aims to improve comprehension among member states and to encourage shared policymaking in domains like governance, economic growth, and legal reform. Via organized discussions, representatives will be urged to reconcile national priorities with the goal of regional cohesion, embodying the intricate yet essential nature of inter-parliamentary diplomacy.

In addition to discussion, the committee aims to evaluate practical frameworks for regional accountability and European integration. With the Baltic States continuing to align themselves with European Union policies and maintain the principles of transparency and rule of law, this committee offers a chance to examine their advancements and ongoing challenges. The agenda topics- centered on EU funding transparency and judicial reforms in post-Soviet nations- aim to prompt delegates to critically evaluate the efficacy of existing mechanism and to formulate practical, forward-thinking policy solutions that could bolster the democratic structure of the Baltic area.

In the end, the goal of the Baltic Assembly Committee is to foster significant and collaborative governance, allowing participants to understand the intricacies of small-state diplomacy in the European setting. Delegates are encouraged to not only reflect their designated member's political views but also to embody the essence of Baltic unity- a place where independence, common history, and contemporary European identity harmoniously exist. This session aims to generate outcomes that emphasize the Baltic

States' ability to cooperate, innovate, and demonstrate collective resilience amidst changing geopolitical and institutional challenges.

2. History

2.1. History of the Baltic Region

The Baltic region possesses a rich and intricate past molded by changing empires, cultural interactions, and persistent battles for independence. Located at the junction of Northern and Eastern Europe, the area has been traditionally shaped by Germanic, Scandinavian, Polish-Lithunaian, and Russian political influences. Even with centruies of foreign domination, the Baltic nations maintained unique national identities, languages, and cultural customs. The 20th century witnessed significant turmoil, featuring short-lived independence, ongoing occupations during World War II, and fifty years of Soviet dominance. The reestablishment of independence in 1991 signaled a pivotal moment, sparking swift political, economic, and legal changes. Since that time, the Baltic States have firmly shifted their focus to the West, joining the European Union and NATO, and becoming amon Europe's most robust and reform-minded democracies. Their collective experience of occupation, resistance, and integration underpins contemporary Baltic cooperation and influences the teamwork embodied in this committee.

2.1.1. Prehistory to the 18th Century

From prehistoric habitation to the early modern era, the Baltic area evolved under the impact of Finno-Ugric and Baltic Indo-European groups, whose linguistic and cultural legacies formed the identities of modern Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. With the growth of trade routes in Northern Europe, the area turned into a key intersection connecting Scandinavia, Central Europe, and the eastern Slavic territories. In the medieval period, German crusading orders, Scandinavian kings, and the Polis-Lithunian Commonwealth all claimed political power,bringing Christianity, feudal arrangements, and new governance systems. By the 17th and 18th centuries, the Baltic regions had transformed into a divided political scene influenced by Swedish, Polish-Lithuanian, and German powers, but in the spite of lacking independent statehood, local languages, customs, and community identities persisted-establishing the cultural continuity that later faciliated the emergence of national awareness.

2.1.1.1. Early Middle Ages

In the Early Middle Ages, approximately between the 6th and 11th centruies, the cultural and political environment of the Baltic area started to become more defined as indigenous tribal communities unified and external connections increased. Finno-Ugric and Baltic tribal communities established fortified towns, organized leadership systems, and borad trade networks, linking them to Scandinavia, Slavic, and Germanic cultures (Urban, 1992). The region was integrated into extensive Viking trade network, featuring pathways that connected the Baltic Sea to the Byzantine Empire and Islamic regions via the Rus' river system (Brink & Price, 2008). Even though none of the Baltic tribes established centralized states during this period, their social structures,religious customs,

and reactions to outside traders and invaders set the groundwork for future political advancements. This era also signified the start of heightened interaction with Christian Europe, which would escalate in the later Middle Ages and peak in the crusading efforts that profoundly altered Baltic societies (Barford, 2001). The Early Middle Ages are therefore a crucial period where the area's internal laid the groundwork for the political changes that ensued.

2.1.1.2. The Conquest of Estonia and Latvia

The takeover of Estonia and Latvia during the 12th and 13th centuries represented a significant turning point in Baltic history, as German crusading factions and Danish monarchy initiated military and convert the area to Christianity. Driven by papal approval and the growing Germanic presence, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword-subsequently integrated into the Teutonic Order- built fortified castles, introduced new governance systems, and undermined native tribal authority (Christiansen, 1997). Danish troops, particularly under King Valdemar II, seized Northern Estonia, establishing a similar sphere of influence to that of the crusading orders (Urban, 2006). The conquest incorporated the areas of modern Estonia and Latvia into the Livonian Confederation, a divided yet impactful political body controlled by German religious and military leaders (Hjaltson, 2003). This era led to significant changes: the enforcement of Western Christianity, the establishment of feudal structures, and the rise of a Baltic German elite whose control would endure for centuries. The change fundamentally reshaped the region's political, cultural, and religious environments, influencing the foundations of medieval and early modern Baltic culture.

2.1.1.3. Independent Lithuania

During the early medieval era, the region that eventually became Lithuania stayed independent from the frameworks of the Carolingian and early Slavic states, maintaining a unique ethno-cultural and political independence. Baltic tribal factions- especially the Aukstaitans and Samogitians- upheld decentralized yet robust socio-political structures, enabling them to withstand external influences from Norse merchants, Rus' principalities, and developing Polish states (Baranauskas, 2014; Kiaupa et al., 2000). Even though a single Lithuanian state had not yet formed, the lack of foreign invasion and the continued strength of local power structures encouraged a distinct continuity of Baltic pagan traditions and influenced the circumstances that would later allow for the swift unification of the Lithuanian political entity in the 13th century. Academics typically consider this era vital for the development of a proto-state identity, as the area's independence set it apart from adjacent regions more closely aligned with Christian or feudal domains (Seja, 2019).

2.2. The Early Modern Age

2.2.1. The Russian Hegemony

In the early modern period, the Baltic region underwent a complicated adjustment of power dynamics, where Muscovy's growing aspirations had a crucial-yet not always

reliably prevailing- impact. After the Livonian War, Russia aimed to gain strategic access to the Baltic SEa and assert its influence over the once-fragmented regions of Livonia, Estonia, and portions of modern-day Latvia. Despite Muscovy's ultimate inability to secure a lasting maritime presence, its military influence disrupted existing political frameworks and altered the regional power dynamics (Kasekamp, 2018). Russian dominance in this era was marked less by straightforward governance and more by the exertion of force, undermining competing assertions, and a continual desire to convert the Baltic into an area for imperial growth (Plakans, 2011).

This dominance was additionally strengthened by Muscovy's slow centralization and the ideological solidification of the Tsardom. The Russian government progressively depicted its western aspirations as a necessity for civilization and security, characterizing the Baltic border as suspectible to Catholic and Protestant forces whose sway endangered the Orthodox domain (Perrie, 2006). These accounts offered the ideological rationale for numerous military operations and diplomatic actions during the 16th and 17th centruies. However, Russia's ability to convert its aspirations into enduring dominance was constrained by internal chaos- including the Time of Troubles (Смутное Время)- and by the reemergence of rival regional powers like Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Consequently, Russian hegemony in the early modern Baltic exhibited variability: a consant geopolitical force instead of uninterrupted control.

Nonetheless, this period set the groundwork for subsequent imperial unification. The strategic priorities established in the early modern period would influence Russian policy through the 18th century and later, ultimately leading to Peter the Great's organized expansion into the Baltic during the Great Northern War. In this regard, early modern Russian dominance signifies not the peak of authority, but the ideological and geopolitical precursor to the conversion of the Baltic into a central theater of Russian imperial strategy.

2.2.2. Gradual Modernization

In the early modern era, the Baltic region experienced a gradual modernization that transformed its administrative, economic, and social frameworks. Even with ongoing influence from external powers like Sweden, Poland-Lithuania, and Russia, local elites progressively embraced Western European methods in governance,law, and trade (Kasekamp, 2018). Towns in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania developed as hubs of commerce and artisanship, supported by the Hanseatic heritage and the increase of maritime links to the North Sea and the broader Baltic trade network (Plakans, 2011).

Simultaneously, legal and administrative reforms gradually apppeared to improve central power and operational effectiveness. Regional leaders and local aristocracy implemented codified laws, tax reforms, and municipal governance systems influenced by Western models, establishing the foundation for future state consolidation (Urban, 1992). Education and literacy grew, as schools and universities facilitated knowledge sharing, while the impact of Protestantism and Catholicism aided cultural and intellectual revitalization. These gradual shifts collectşvely prepare the ground for the evolution from divided medieval socities to increasingly unified early modern states, allowing the Baltic

nations to manage the challenges of external control while progressively claiming their institutional independence.

2.3. Independence and the 20th Century

The 20th century represented a time of significant change for the Baltic States, characterized by the rise of sovereign nation-states, external occupations, and eventual incorporation into European and global systems. After the fall of the Russian Empire in 1918, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania proclaimed their independence, creating contemporary institutions, constitutions, and national governments while confronting both internal and external difficulties, such as border conflicts and the necessity for political unification. The interwar years experienced the establishment of cultural, educational, and economic frameworks that strengthened national identities; however, this period of autonomy was suddenly disrupted by the Nazi and Soviet occupations in World War II. Following years of Soviet dominance, the Baltic States regained their independence in 1991, initiating a journey of democratic change, economic transition, and integration into NATO and the European Union, thereby concluding a significant century-long path from oppression to autonomy.

2.3.1. Estonian Liberation

The fall of the Russian Empire in 1917-1918 presented a distinct chance for Estonia to claims its national sovereignty, resulting in the official declaration of independence on 24 February 1918. This time was marked by vigorous political activism and armed conflict. The newly formed Estonian state encountered immediate danger from Bolshevik troops moving in from the east and German paramilitary groups remaining from the World War I Eastern Front. Estonian officials effectively mobilized local militias, volunteer units, and subsequently collaborated with Finnish and British troops, showcasing advanced military and diplomatic skills despite scarce resources (Raun, 2001). The Estonian War of Independence, concluding with the Tartu Peace Treaty in 1920, established both international recognition and the institutionaş groundwork for the new state. In thşs period, Estonia enacted a democratic constitution, created civil administration, and formulated systems for education, public health, and local governance (Kirby, 1995). Alongside political and military successes, this era experienced a cultural revival: nationaş newspapers, theaters, and educational establishments thrived, while the standardization of the Estonian language strengthened a collective identity, crucial for enduring nation building.

The interwar era enabled Estonia to solidify its sovereignty and enhance its domestic frameworks, but the nation continued to be susceptibl to regional geopolitical dynamics. During the 1920s and 1930s, Estonia dealt with intricate diplomatic ties with neighbouring countries like the Soviet Union, Latvia and Finland while addressing economic difficulties arising from scarce natural resources and reliance on Baltic and Nordic trade systems (Plakans, 2011). Cultural and educational advancements persisted, featuring growth in literacy initiatives and support for the arts, which strengthened national unity. Nonetheless, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 suddenly terminated this autonomy. In 1940, Soviet troops invaded Estonia, prompting widespread arrests,

deportations, and the methodical destruction of political structures. The occupation by the Nazis from 1941 to 1944 instituted a distinct, but equally tyrannical, regime, utilizing local resources, drafting labor, and enforcing severe restrictions on civilian life (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993). After the reinstatement of Soviet authority in 1944, Estonia faced years of occupation, marked by policies of Russification, enforced collectivization, and the repression of cultural expression. In spite of these severe circumstances, Estonian national identity endured via underground networks, secretive education, language preservation, folklore, religious customs, and diplomatic actions overseas, especially by the Estonian government-in-exile, which upheld legal recognition of Estonia's sovereignty in Western nations (Raun, 2001). This extended occupation solidified the significance of cultural resilience and strategic diplomacy as foundational elements of the Estonian national identity.

The late 1980s saw the revival of widespread political activism and cultural expression in estonia, leading to the era termed the Singing Revolution. Calm large-scale protests, extensive communal singing of patriotic anthems, and civic engagement efforts emerged as strong manifestations of shared identity, indicating determination for independence both locally and globally (Smith, 2001). Estonian officials adeptly merged community activism with diplomatic efforts, utilizing the declining influence the Soviet Union to advocate for the reisntatement of statehood. In August 1991, during the unsuccessful coup in Moscow, Estonia officially announced its restored independence. This phase was characterized by the swift restoration of democratic institutions, legal frameworks, and economic changes shifting towards a market-driven economy. Cultural institutions were rejuvenated, national symbols restored, and Estonia sought global recognition and integration,leading to its eventual membership in the European Union and NATO in the early 2000s. The regaining of independence in the 1990s was a political and cultural victory, showcasing years of opposition, identity maintenance, and tactical governance amid exceptionally difficult conditions.

2.3.2. Latvian Liberation

Latvia's contemporary struggle for independence started with the downfall of the Russian Empire in World War I, cresting a unique opportunity for national self-determination. On 18 November 1918, the Latvian Provisional National Council proclaimed independence; however, the nascent republic swiftly encountered simultaneous military dangers from Bolshevik troops, German Landeswehr forces, and local pro-German groups anxious to regain regional supremacy (Plakans, 2011). The Latvian War of Independence (1918-1920) emerged as a multi-front struggle, with Latvian national forces- particularly the Latvian Riflemen and opposing Landeswehr battalions-being crucial. With assitance from Estonia, Britain, and various Allied Powers, Latvian troops steadily gained control over their land, culminating in the 1920 signing of the Latvian-Soviet Peace Treaty, where Soviet Russia officially relinquished all claims to Latvia (Bleire et al., 2014). During this initial phase, the Saeima (parliament) waas founded, a democratic constitution was enacted, educational reforms in the Latvian language were introduced, and structural adjustments were implemented to promote agrarian modernization. The strengthening of state institutions and cultural resurgence in these early years established

the normative basis for Latvian identity, administration, and subsequent battles for independence.

Latvia underwent swift modernization in political, economic, and cultural areas during the interwar years, but faced persistent challenges from internal divisions and economic reliance on agricultural exports (Plakans, 2011). In 1934, Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis executed an authoritarian coup, disbanding parliament and creating a nationalist yet comparatively advanncement-focused regime. Latvia's independence was abruptly terminated following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939), which allocated the Baltic States to the Soviet zone of influence. In 1940, the USSR occupied and annexed Latvia, which was followed by widespread arrests, deportations to Siberia, and the dismantling of civil institutions (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993). The occupation of Lavia by Nazi Germany (1941-1944) substituted Soviet oppression with its own methods of repression, enforced labor, and the annihilation of the Jewish population during the Holocaust. In 1944, upon the return of Soviet troops, Latvia was restored to the USSR as the Latvian SSR, marking the beginning of years of enforced collectivization, oppression of national elites, and policies of Russification. Industrialization resulted in economic progress but also significant immigration from other Soviet republics, fundamentally changing Latvia's demographic makeup (Bleire et al., 2014). Notwithstanding rigid political restrictions, Latvian cultural identity- especially language, folklore, and historical memory- persisted via underground networks, dissident literature, secret religious practices, and the endeavors of the Latvian diaspora. These types of resistance maintained the concept of legal continuity, a principle that would later be crucial in Latvia's arguments for regained independence.

The late 1980s marked a revival of Latvian national awareness, fueled by Gorbachev's reforms and the wider Baltic demand for independence. In 1988, the Popular front of Latvia arose as the primary political movement supporting national rights, cultural preservation, and democratic rule. Mass protests-most notably thhe 1989 Baltic Way, where two million Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians linked arms over 600 kilometers-represented unmatched solidarity and global awareness (Smith, 2001). Latvia progressively confirmed its legal continuity as a state unlawfully occupied in 1940, reaching a climax with the declaration of complete independence on 21 August 1991 after the Moscow coup's failure. The exit of Soviet troops, swift diplomatic acknowledgment, and constitutional reinstatement enabled Latvia to restore its political framework based on prewar democratic principles. The 1990s also presented challenges: economic changes, discussions on citizenship and language, and attempts to reintegrate Latvia into Europe. However, the nation progressed rapidly towards Western institutions, finalizing market reforms, establishing stable democratic governance, and ultimately joining the European Union and NATO. Latvia's liberation signifies not just a political achievement but also the peak of years of cultural resilience, legal determination, and civic engagement through various occupations.

2.3.3. Lithuanian Liberation

The fall of the Russian Empire amid the revolutions of 1917 provided a significant opportunity for Lithuania to reclaim its long-suppressed independence. Lithuanian political leaders, mainly through the Council of Lithuania (Lievutos Taryba), had started expressing autonomy demands during World War I, yet it was the collapse of imperial power that faciliated decisive measures. On February 16, 1918, the Council released the Act of independence for Lithuania, restoring the nation as a democratic republic based on the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Senn, 1999). At first, the German occupying forces hindered significant progress, but following Germany's defeat, Lithuania could create its own institutions and uphold its sovereignty. The newly established government faced several military challenges: Bolshevik troops to the east, Bermontians (West Russian Volunteer Army) to the south, and Polish expansionist aims in the Vilnius area (Balkelis, 2018). By using a mix of diplomatic initiatives, local defense groups, and partnerships-especially with Latvia and Estonia- Lithuania was able to achieve international recognition. The Warsaw-Suwalki Agreement (1920), despite being contentious because of the loss of Vilnius, signified the official conclusion of significant conflicts anf enabled Lithuania to solidify its independence during the interwar period.

In the interwar years, Lithuania engaged in extensive nation-building, administrative changes, and cultural revitalization, despite the necessity of making Kaunas the temporary capital due to the loss of Vilnius to Polan (Snyder, 2003). Politcal conflicts reached a peak in 1926 when Antanas Smetona formed an authoritarian government aimed at stabilizing the nation. Lithuania's vulnerable geopolitical situation became clear post-1938, as Nazi Germany and Soviet Union applied pressure, ultimately leading to Germany's annexatiion of Klaipeda and the Soviet occupation in 1940 through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Malksoo, 2010). Compulsory Sovietization, widespread deportations, and political repression ensued. The Nazi occupation between 1941 and 1944 brought a new level of violence, which included the annihilation of Lithuania's Jewish community during the Holocaust (Braham, 2000). Following the Soviet reoccupation in 1944, Lithuania was rejioned to the USSR, leading to armed opposition referred to as the Forest Brothers movement, which continued until the early 1950s (Plakans, 2011). The following decades experienced ongoing cultural and political opposition that maintained the notion of national independence until the late Soviet era.

The push for Lithuanian independence intensified during Gorbachev's liberal political reforms. Protests honoring the Molotov-Ribbentrop and public dissent against Soviet policies developed into a unified political movement with the establihment of Sajudis in 1988 (kasekamp, 2017). The movement urged the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet to declre legislative authority, resulting in the Act of the Re-Establishment of the State of Lithuania on 11 March 1990. The Soviet reaction involved economic blockades and military force, culminating in a tragic climax during the January 1991 incidents, where Soviet soldiers killed civilians protecting the Vilnius TV Tower (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993). International focus and national solidarity bolstered Lithuania's stance, and after the unsuccessful coup in Moscow in August 1991, Lithuania gained complete international recognition. By late 1991, the republic had reinstated diplomatic operations,

rebuilt democratic structures, and launched market reforms, concluding the extensive journey of national liberation.

2.4. History of the Baltic Assembly

The Baltic Assembly was formed in 1991, amid the Soviet Union's ultimate disintegration, as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania aimed to align their shifts towards democratic governance, market economies, and integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. While there were earlier examples of Baltic interparliamentary collaboration-particularly with the 1934 Baltic Entente- the 1940 Soviet occupation interrupted the continuity of these initiatives (Plakans, 2011). The revitalized Assembly resulted from a shared understanding that parliamentary collaboration was crucial for restoring the states' global standings, enhancing regional security, and aligning legislative frameworks with European democratic norms (Kasekamp, 2017). The agreement established in Tallinn in November 1991 officially recognized the Assembly as a consultative interparliamentary body aimed at promoting discussion on foreign policy, economic reform, minority matters, border security, and the exit of Russian military forces (Malksoo, 2010).

Furing the 1990s, the Baltic Assembly was instrumental in aligning legislation concerning trade, taxation, defense collaboration, and environmental management. These initiatives were essential in equipping the Baltic states for joining the European Union and NATO, oth of which necessitated significant policy alignment and institutional convergence (Smith et al., 2002). The Assembly worked together with the Baltic Council of Ministers, establishing a dual-structure that connected legislative discussion with executive alignment. Despite having no binding legisltaive power, the assembly served as a venue for policy alignment, regional promotion, and the expression of common strategic objectives on the international stage (Laurinavicius & Motieka, 2006).

Post-EU membership in 2004, the Baltic Assembly slowly transitioned its emphasis from integration to coordinatio aftter accession, advocating collaborative methods for energy security, transport networks, digital governance, and defense planning-especially in light of changing security threats in the area (Auers, 2015). The organization has further enhanced collaboration with Nordic legislatures, the Benelux Parliament, and the European Parliament, bolstering its function as a regional diplomatic player. Although it holds concultive status, the Assembly remains a symbol of Baltic unity and a crucial tool for ensuring legislative cohesion among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, particulary amidst changing geopolitical circumstances (Kasekamp, 2017).

3. Country-Specific Informations and Government Systems

3.1. Repulic of Estonia (Eesti Vabariik)

Estonia is a parliamentary republic characterized by a constitutional framework that highlights democratic leadership, division of authority, and safeguarding civil rights. The contemporary Estonian government functions under the Constitution of 1992, which outlines the political framework and designates the Riigikogu as the primary legislative

authority (Taagepera, 2020). The Riigikogu is made up of 101 members elected via proportional representation, showcasing Estonia's dedication to a competitive multiparty democracy. The President performs mainly ceremonial duties but retains constitutional authority, such as appointing the Prime Minister and enacting laws (Møller & Skaaning, 2019). Judicial supervision is primarily found in the Supreme Court (Riigikohus), serving as the top court of appeal and as the authority for constitutional review (Nyman-Metcalf & Papageorgiou, 2021).

Estonia's administrative framework showcases a unitary yet decentralized governing approach. The administrative reform of 2017 significantly decreased the number of municipalities and aimed to enhance local governance capabilities (Tatar et al., 2019). Local authorities oversee education, social services, infrastructure, and environmental management, whereas Estonia's innovative e-governance framework guarantees a significant level of administrative efficiency and transparency (Kalvet, 2020).

Estonia's political culture is influenced by its transition following the Soviet era, integration into Europe, and advancements in digital technology. The party system is somewhat fragmented, with coalitions being common, illustrating proportional representation dynamics (Balcere, 2022). Although ethnic relations are a crucial political aspect—due to the considerable Russian-speaking minority—Estonia experiences greater political stability and institutional trust than many other post-Soviet countries (Smith, 2021).

Estonia features a highly digitized and open-market economy that is integrated into the EU. Developments like e-Residency, national digital IDs, and blockchain-driven administrative frameworks showcase Estonia's worldwide prominence in digital governance (Hinrikus & Kotka, 2019). Major economic challenges consist of a shrinking population, shortages of skilled workers, and energy security problems exacerbated by geopolitical conflicts in the region (OECD, 2023). Nonetheless, Estonia scores well in indices related to transparency, business environment, and digital competitiveness.

In its foreign policy, Estonia has a distinct Euro-Atlantic focus. NATO membership serves as the foundation of national security, bolstered by the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup (Fiott, 2020). Estonia actively participates in the Baltic Assembly, the Nordic-Baltic collaboration frameworks, and EU digital policy efforts (Janeliūnas, 2021). Relations with Russia continue to be cautious and restricted because of historical memories and current regional security issues.

Estonia, with a population of around 1.3 million, encounters structural issues like an aging populace and regional inequalities (Statistics Estonia, 2023). Ethnic Estonians make upapproximately 70% of the population, whereas Russian-speaking communities account for around one-fourth, influencing current discussions on integration, citizenship policy, and language issues (Aalto & Berg, 2022). In spite of these difficulties, Estonia upholds robust metrics in digital inclusion, civil freedoms, and institutional strength.

3.2. The Republic of Latvia (Latvijas Republika)

Latvia is a parliamentary republic with a constitutional framework founded on the Satversme of 1922, which is among Europe's oldest operating constitutions (Bleiere et al., 2022). The Saeima, Latvia's single-chamber parliament consisting of 100 members chosen through proportional representation, possesses primary legislative power and is crucial in forming the government. The President serves as the state leader with limited yet symbolically important constitutional authorities, such as legislative veto and the ability to start government discussions (Ikstens, 2019). The Cabinet of Ministers, headed by the Prime Minister, holds executive power, which is based on the confidence of Parliament. The Constitutional Court, founded in 1996, is the backbone of the judiciary, ensuring the protection of constitutional oversight, human rights, and the separation of powers (Levits, 2020).

Latvia's governance structure embodies a unitary state with an increasingly modernized administrative framework. The territorial reform of 2021 decreased the number of municipalities, with the goal of enhancing economic capacity, improving public service quality, and increasing administrative efficiency (Bröckling & Wintjes, 2022). Municipal authorities manage education, social services, environmental stewardship, and local development programs. Latvia's robust anti-corruption mechanisms and European administrative norms significantly influence public administration, especially after joining the EU in 2004 (OECD, 2022). Digitization continues to be a developing focus; although Latvia follows Estonia, it has achieved notable advancements in integrating e-governance and modernizing public services (Vanags & Vilka, 2021).

Latvia's political scene is marked by ideological variety, multiparty division, and regular shifts in coalitions. This volatility is influenced in part by Latvia's ethnic makeup: around 25% of the population speaks Russian, affecting discussions on citizenship, language policy, and national identity (Agarin & Buštíková, 2022). Political parties that advocate for minority interests, promote integrationist agendas, and comprise centrist-liberal coalitions have significantly influenced parliamentary dynamics. Latvia continues to demonstrate strong democratic resilience, rule of law effectiveness, and press freedom compared to other post-Soviet nations, despite intermittent populist movements (Freedom House, 2023).

Latvia's economy adheres to a liberal market framework, focusing on financial services, logistics, and manufacturing aimed at exports. The nation underwent swift modernization following its independence in 1991, which was followed by a substantial restructuring effort after the 2008 financial crisis (Åslund & Dombrovskis, 2011). Ongoing obstacles consist of regional economic inequalities, population decline, workforce shortages, and energy dependence—compounded by Latvia's attempts to lessen dependence on Russian energy sources (European Commission, 2023). Latvia, however, engages extensively with EU markets and actively takes part in Baltic regional energy and infrastructure initiatives, including Rail Baltica and the synchronized Baltic electricity network.

Latvia's foreign and security strategies highlight Euro-Atlantic integration, with NATO

membership being the foundation of national defense. The nation accommodates a multinational battlegroup as a component of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, bolstering deterrence in the Baltic area (Szymański, 2020). Latvia is a prominent supporter of EU digital security, cyber defense, and initiatives related to the Eastern Partnership. Relations with Russia continue to be strained, influenced by historical recollections, worries about hybrid threats, and Latvia's strong backing for Ukraine (Sprūds & Rostoks, 2021).

Latvia is experiencing one of Europe's steepest population reductions, influenced by emigration, low birth rates, and an aging population (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023). Ethnic Latvians make up approximately 63% of the populace, whereas Russian-speaking minorities account for about 25%, influencing current discussions on language usage, citizenship legislation reforms, and integration strategies (Aalto et al., 2020). Despite these separations, Latvia has consistently advanced in enhancing civic identity, safeguarding minority rights, and developing inclusive governance structures.

3.3. The Republic of Lithuanian (Lietuvos Respublika)

Lithuania, the largest and southernmost of the Baltic nations, has been historically influenced by its role as the core of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania—one of Europe's strongest political powers (Kiaupa et al., 2011). After centuries of the Polish-Lithuanian union and subsequent inclusion in the Russian Empire, Lithuania underwent a significant national revival in the late 19th century that established the basis for contemporary statehood. Following its independence in 1990 as the first Soviet republic to separate, Lithuania established a semi-presidential republic featuring a dual executive system: a President elected directly who manages foreign affairs and national security, and a Prime Minister who heads the government with the support of the unicameral Seimas (Budrytė, 2005). This institutional framework combines parliamentary responsibility with a more prominent presidential position, highlighting Lithuania's historical focus on executive stability throughout early post-Soviet transitions (Jurkonis, 2018).

The Seimas acts as Lithuania's main legislative body and is chosen via a hybrid electoral system that includes proportional representation and single-member constituencies. Judicial authority is organized around the Constitutional Court, created in 1993, acting as a key element for maintaining constitutional order, separation of powers, and safeguarding fundamental rights (Šileikis & Jarašiūnas, 2017). Since joining the EU in 2004, Lithuania's governance reforms have focused on modernizing public administration, establishing anti-corruption measures, ensuring judicial independence, and promoting decentralized service delivery via municipalities. The nation has also become a frontrunner in digital governance, cybersecurity, and regional policy alignment —especially in energy, defense, and infrastructure integration throughout the Baltic Sea area (OECD, 2021).

The political scene in Lithuania is characterized by ideological diversity, competitive electoral processes, and shifting coalitions between center-right and center-left parties.

Political fragmentation is moderate relative to Latvia, with established party families like the Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats, the Social Democratic Party, and liberal groups maintaining lasting roles in governance (Ramonaitė, 2016). The population is predominantly ethnically Lithuanian (more than 80%), with significant Polish and Russian communities mainly located in the Vilnius area; these demographics impact discussions on language policy, minority education, local autonomy, and electoral districting (Kasatkina & Beresnevičiūtė, 2018). Although interethnic conflicts are typically minimal, the Lithuanian government upholds strict measures regarding Russian disinformation, media oversight, and national safety.

Lithuania has shifted from a post-Soviet industrial economy to a vibrant, open, and innovation-driven market system. Important sectors consist of biotechnology, financial technology, logistics, sustainable energy, and advanced manufacturing. Robust macroeconomic fundamentals have facilitated Lithuania's swift alignment with EU income levels, yet labor shortages, emigration, and an aging population continue to pose significant challenges (European Commission, 2023). Lithuania has actively implemented strong energy independence strategies, such as building the Klaipėda LNG terminal and engaging in the synchronization project for the Baltic electricity grid.

In foreign and security matters, Lithuania holds one of the strongest pro-NATO and pro-EU positions in the area. It accommodates NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup and has emerged as a strong proponent of democratic resilience, cyber defense, and assistance for Ukraine and Belarusian civil society (Jakniūnaitė, 2020). Lithuania's strategic perspective is influenced by its historical experiences of Soviet rule, resulting in firm commitments to deterrence, regional collaboration, and integration into European security.

Lithuania is experiencing a notable decline in population because of emigration and low birth rates, but recent trends in return migration indicate a slight stabilization (Statistics Lithuania, 2023). In spite of these difficulties, Lithuania sustains elevated degrees of social unity, robust civic identity, and resilient democratic frameworks, establishing itself as one of the most politically stable and reform-driven nations in the Baltic area (Freedom House, 2023).

4. Culture, Language and Religion in the Baltic States

4.1. Estonia

Heritage of Finno-Ugric languages, identity of the Baltic region, and long-standing influences from German, Swedish, and Russian cultures. The Estonian language, belonging to the Finnic division of the Uralic family, is regarded as one of Europe's most unique linguistic frameworks and has strong structural connections to Finnish, yet it remains completely unrelated to the Indo-European languages used by its neighboring countries (Raun, 2001). National identity has traditionally been maintained through folklore, oral traditions, and the Song Festival (Laulupidu), a key element in the Estonian national revival of the 19th century and subsequently in the peaceful independence movement referred to as the "Singing Revolution" (Thomson, 2020). Modern Estonian

culture highlights the importance of literary creation, choral music, digital advancements, and a civic understanding of national identity that merges cultural heritage with contemporary social change.

Estonia is frequently characterized as one of the most secular nations globally in terms of religion. Although Lutheranism historically prevailed because of German and Swedish impact, present formal religious affiliation is minimal, with many Estonians considering themselves non-religious or culturally Christian (Kasekamp, 2018). Among the existing religious groups, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Estonian Orthodox Church—representing both Constantinople and Moscow Patriarchate branches—are the largest denominations, although engagement keeps decreasing. Indigenous belief systems like maausk, a modern resurgence of pre-Christian nature-oriented traditions, have gained cultural significance and are officially acknowledged as integral to Estonia's religious landscape (Valk, 2012).

Estonia's culture represents a mixture of Nordic and Baltic identities, frequently aligning more with the Nordic region because of its linguistic connections, administrative traditions, and socio-political stance (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2019). This dual association shapes all aspects from national branding to cultural diplomacy. Despite considerable demographic changes during the Soviet era, such as the emergence of a substantial Russian-speaking minority, Estonia has upheld strong policies focused on promoting the Estonian language and integrating minority groups via education and citizenship initiatives. In summary, Estonian culture is characterized by its distinct language, a non-religious social structure, and a strong focus on continuity, strength, and cultural expression.

4.2. Latvia

Latvia's cultural, linguistic, and religious environment showcases a complex history influenced by native Baltic tribes, Germanic Hanseatic impact, Polish-Lithuanian governance, and long periods of Russian and Soviet rule. Contemporary Latvian identity has developed through the 19th-century national revival, the experiences of 20th-century sovereignty, and the post-Soviet period of nation-building, harmonizing European integration with the safeguarding of national culture and heritage.

Latvian is the official language of Latvia and belongs to the Eastern Baltic group within the Indo-European language family. Although Lithuanian and Latvian are closely linked, Latvian evolved separately because of historical divisions and external factors. In the Soviet period, Russian was extensively utilized in public spaces, especially in cities like Riga and Daugavpils. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, the government enacted extensive language policies aimed at enhancing the prominence of Latvian in education, media, and public services, establishing proficiency in Latvian as a criterion for citizenship and several public-sector jobs (Latvian Ministry of Education and Science, 2023). Russian continues to be a significant minority language, spoken by about one-quarter of the populace, influencing Latvia's linguistic diversity and integration strategies.

Latvian culture is defined by its abundant traditions in folk music, mythology, and seasonal ceremonies. The dainas, brief folk poems or songs, are essential to national heritage and are acknowledged by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage. These songs, together with national song festivals, are integral to the collective Baltic song culture, linking Latvia to Estonia and Lithuania. Latvian cultural life incorporates vibrant contemporary aspects, such as choral music, theater, dance, and visual arts, with Riga being famous for its rich Art Nouveau architecture (Plakans, 2011). Rural customs, like the Jāņi (Midsummer) festival, remain vital to national identity, featuring bonfires, flower crowns, singing, and dancing.

Lutheranism has historically been the predominant religion in Latvia because of the Reformation and German impact, especially in the central and western areas. In eastern Latvia (Latgale), Roman Catholicism is the prevailing religion, showcasing the impact of Polish-Lithuanian culture. The largest religious communities today are the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Latvian Orthodox Church (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2022). Soviet atheistic measures led to extensive secularization, yet religious customs still possess cultural importance, particularly in influencing regional identities and national heritage. Currently, Latvia is viewed as moderately secular, with a considerable part of the population identifying as non-religious.

4.3. Lithuania

Lithuania's cultural, linguistic, and religious identity has been deeply influenced by its past as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, later Polish-Lithuanian union, dominion of the Russian Empire, and Soviet control. Modern Lithuanian identity embodies the blending of historical legacy, European alignment, and national resurgence movements that arose in the 19th century and reached a peak during the independence initiatives of the 20th century.

Lithuanian, as the official language, is the most conservative of the living Indo-European languages and preserves numerous archaic characteristics that are lacking in other European languages (Zinkevičius, 2012). It functions as a fundamental aspect of national identity, enduring through centuries of foreign domination and efforts at Russification. Although Polish and Russian are used by minority groups, especially in Vilnius and the southeastern areas, Lithuanian serves as the main language for education, government, and media. Language policies after 1990 have focused on standardizing languages, integrating minorities, and promoting public use in official contexts, thereby strengthening the Lithuanian language's symbolic and functional significance in nation-building (Budrytė, 2005).

Lithuanian culture embodies a blend of Baltic pagan traditions, Christian elements, and European modernization. Folk music, cultural festivals, and myths—including the observance of Joninės (Midsummer solstice) and Užgavėnės (pre-Lenten carnival)—are vital to cultural expression (Kiaupa et al., 2011). Lithuanian literature, theater, and visual

arts have traditionally acted as tools for national rejuvenation and political opposition, especially during times of foreign domination. Today, Lithuania harmonizes the conservation of rural customs with urban cultural energy, establishing Vilnius and Kaunas as pivotal hubs for arts, music, and design in the region.

Lithuania is the most Catholic among the Baltic states, where Roman Catholicism plays a central role in both spiritual and cultural aspects. Around 77% of the population is Catholic, and religious practices significantly influence festivals, life milestones, and community unity (Statistics Lithuania, 2023). The nation is home to small Orthodox, Protestant, and Jewish communities, adding to Lithuania's religious diversity. The post-Soviet era has witnessed a resurgence of Catholic traditions and organizations, coupled with wider secularization patterns characteristic of contemporary European societies (Budrytė, 2005).

5. Baltic Assembly's International Cooperation

5.1. Nordic Council

The Baltic Assembly (BA) upholds strong international collaboration with regional organizations, with the Nordic Council as one of its key partners. Founded in 1952, the Nordic Council acts as a parliamentary platform for the Nordic nations, fostering inter-country cooperation on economic, ecological, and social matters (Raunio, 2019). The Baltic Assembly's collaboration with the Nordic Council demonstrates common historical, cultural, and political principles, along with geographical closeness, which fosters discussions on issues like regional security, climate change, digitalization, and sustainable development.

Cooperation takes place via joint sessions, expert gatherings, and collaborative working groups, enabling Baltic and Nordic lawmakers to share best practices in governance, legislative progress, and the safeguarding of minority rights. These collaborative strategies strengthen the Baltic Assembly's objective of incorporating the Baltic nations into wider regional structures while promoting shared understanding and policy coherence with Nordic countries (Suksi, 2020). The collaboration has facilitated aligned responses to security issues, especially regarding NATO and EU policy structures, as both areas emphasize resilience against hybrid threats, cybersecurity, and energy autonomy.

Alongside official parliamentary engagements, the Nordic-Baltic partnership encompasses cultural, educational, and technological projects, enhancing connections among individuals. By means of scholarships, collaborative research initiatives, and youth exchange programs, the partnership transcends government frameworks, fostering a collective regional identity based on democratic principles and sustainable growth (Rothstein, 2017). In general, the collaboration between the Baltic Assembly and the Nordic Council showcases a strategic and multifaceted approach to regional integration and policy alignment.

5.2. Benelux Parliament

The Baltic Assembly (BA) fosters collaborative ties with the Benelux Parliament, which is the inter-parliamentary institution representing Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Founded in 1955, the Benelux Parliament promotes legislative discussions, policy alignment, and regional integration efforts among its member countries (Maurer, 2018). For the Baltic Assembly, interaction with the Benelux Parliament offers a significant example of collaboration among small states, especially in fields like economic integration, cross-border infrastructure, environmental safeguarding, and social policy.

The Baltic Assembly collaborates with the Benelux Parliament via official meetings, shared working groups, and joint conferences, enabling parliamentarians from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to share insights with established regional governance frameworks. Such interactions promote legislative alignment, encourage exemplary practices in parliamentary monitoring, and assist in unified strategies for EU-level policy issues (Van der Woude, 2020). Moreover, the alliance aids the Baltic countries in enhancing their diplomatic and economic involvement in the European Union, providing perspectives on successful regional cooperation among smaller to mid-sized member states.

In addition to policy exchange, the collaboration encompasses cultural and educational efforts, including academic exchanges, youth initiatives, and collaborative research projects focused on governance and sustainability. These initiatives enhance interpersonal connections and bolster democratic principles, in line with the Baltic Assembly's wider aim of fostering regional stability, integration, and consistency in policies (Hermans, 2017). The relationship with the Benelux Parliament represents a strategic method of learning from established regional parliamentary structures while improving the Baltic Assembly's international profile.

5.3. Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference

The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) stands as one of the most significant regional cooperation frameworks of the Baltic Assembly, bringing together parliamentary representatives from every Baltic Sea country to foster political dialogue, democratic governance, and multilateral policymaking. Founded in 1991, the BSPC emphasizes crucial regional topics like environmental sustainability, maritime safety, human rights, and economic growth, functioning as a platform for collective responses to cross-border challenges (Henningsen, 2013). The Baltic Assembly's involvement in the BSPC enhances its capacity to align legislative priorities with Nordic, Central European, and European Union partners, reinforcing the Baltic region's collective participation in macro-regional collaboration (Schymik, 2015).

Collaboration between the Baltic Assembly and the BSPC is organized via joint resolutions, thematic working groups, and yearly conferences that tackle urgent issues such as marine pollution, climate adaptation, renewable energy transition, maritime governance, and cross-border mobility. These systems allow the Baltic Assembly to coordinate national laws with wider regional and EU strategies, especially under the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, which highlights sustainable growth, innovation, and

environmental resilience (Schymik, 2015). By contributing to BSPC discussions and initiatives, the Baltic Assembly actively influences policy directions for the broader Baltic Sea region.

In addition to political and legislative collaboration, the BSPC promotes social and academic alliances via youth forums, involvement of civil society, and regional research collaborations. These initiatives enhance interpersonal connections and reinforce common democratic principles throughout the Baltic Sea region (Björk & Skjold, 2016). Thus, partnering with the BSPC not only enhances legislative cooperation but also fosters ongoing regional stability, cultural ties, and environmental management—key goals that align with the Baltic Assembly's primary mission to encourage integration and security in Northern Europe.

5.4. GUAM Parliamentary Assembly

Since 2008, the Baltic Assembly has upheld formal parliamentary collaboration with the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly, based on a Cooperation Declaration signed on 19 June 2009 in Vilnius (Baltic Assembly, 2009). This partnership seeks to enhance democratic, socio-economic, and cultural progress in the Baltic and GUAM nations, while encouraging stability and conflict resolution within the GUAM area via expanded European involvement (Baltic Assembly, 2009). The stated priorities focus on improving security collaboration — especially in addressing organized crime, human trafficking, and cyber threats — along with advancing energy sustainability, bolstering civil society and independent media, and exchanging knowledge concerning European integration processes (Baltic Assembly, 2020–2023).

In practical terms, the organizations work together through joint plenary sessions, committee meetings, and frequent summits between the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly and the Bureau of the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly (Baltic Assembly, 2009). These systems promote ongoing conversations and synchronized efforts on legislative and policy matters pertinent to both areas. Lately, the Baltic Assembly has highlighted its function as a link between GUAM nations and the West, particularly regarding regional security and democratic strength — a position reiterated during the GUAM PA's 15th session in 2022 (Tiidus, 2022).

In addition to legislative collaboration, the alliance is strengthened by mutual declarations and collective efforts. Both Assemblies have released statements denouncing the conflict in the GUAM area, underscoring the importance of sovereignty and international law while pledging to work together on energy, environmental, and humanitarian issues (GUAM PA & Baltic Assembly, 2016). This parliamentary diplomacy emphasizes the Baltic Assembly's significant role in bolstering Eastern Partnership efforts and reinforces a lasting dedication to democratic collaboration in Europe's eastern neighborhood.

5.5. European Union

The Baltic Assembly (BA) is closely connected to European Union systems, utilizing EU macro-regional strategies and financial resources to promote its regional goals. A major

partnership focuses on the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), which the Assembly aids with legislative alignment, policy coordination, and project promotion (Government of Sweden, 2025). The EUSBSR outlines three primary goals — “Save the Sea,” “Connect the Region,” and “Increase Prosperity” — which align with essential priorities of the Baltic Assembly, including environmental conservation, transport and energy connectivity, and economic growth (European Commission via EUR-Lex, 2025; Government of Sweden, 2025).

To implement these objectives, the Baltic Assembly engages in working groups and partners with EU funding mechanisms to support cross-border projects in green energy, innovation, and sustainable infrastructure (Interreg Baltic, 2025). Additionally, via its parliamentary forums and collaborative declarations, the BA promotes the alignment of member states’ policies with EU standards, thereby strengthening regional integration and ensuring that the Baltic states’ concerns are acknowledged at the EU level. This collaboration also enhances the Baltic perspective in EU security, regional resilience, and digital governance discussions, thus amplifying the region’s impact on European policy-making.

In summary, the Baltic Assembly's collaboration with the EU reflects a strategic and formalized method: it not only provides access to EU resources and policy networks but also guarantees that the Assembly stays a key player in influencing the European future of the Baltic Sea Region.

5.6. NATO

The Baltic Assembly highlights NATO as a key foundation of its security and defense collaboration structure. Via its yearly resolutions and collaborative statements, the Assembly continually emphasizes that transatlantic unity is crucial for the Baltic area's strength, particularly in facing hybrid threats and strategic difficulties. In the 38th joint statement from the Baltic Council, the Assembly asserted that "NATO and the Transatlantic partnership are fundamental for Europe’s security and defense," highlighting the importance of improved military interoperability and collaborative capability development (Baltic Assembly, 2023). This parliamentary commitment indicates stronger practical connections: the Assembly’s Security and Foreign Affairs Committee collaborates closely with national defense agencies to support NATO’s regional strategy, bolstering the Baltic states’ alignment with Alliance goals (Latvian Ministry of Defence; Baltic Assembly, 2014). Additionally, the Baltic Assembly’s longstanding support for NATO membership played a vital role during the accession processes of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, fostering collective national initiatives to achieve the Alliance’s political and military criteria (Baltic Assembly, 2000). This continuous collaboration allows the Baltic Assembly to function not only as a platform for democratic alignment but also as a legislative link that strengthens NATO's presence and deterrent capabilities in Northern Europe.

5.7. ICJ

The Baltic Assembly (BA) emphasizes its strong dedication to international law and the

peaceful settlement of conflicts by endorsing the role of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as a key cornerstone of the rules-based international system. In recent collaborative declarations at the United Nations General Assembly, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania conveyed their profound gratitude for the ICJ's neutrality, legal proficiency, and its authoritative position in the interpretation and advancement of international law (Lithuanian MFA et al., 2023). The Baltic States regard the ICJ as crucial for upholding international peace and security, especially in tackling global issues like climate change, cross-border environmental obligations, and transnational disputes (Lithuanian MFA et al., 2023). By openly expressing their backing for the Court and advocating for broader global recognition of its authority, the Baltic Assembly strengthens its strategic aim of securing regional stability on robust legal pillars (Estonian MFA et al., 2022)

5.8. ECHR

The Baltic Assembly prioritizes the safeguarding of human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law, closely aligning with the legal principles and institutional function of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Since their accession to the Council of Europe in the early 1990s, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have consistently depended on the ECHR as the ultimate authority for protecting individual rights and guaranteeing adherence to the European Convention on Human Rights. The judgments of the Court have been instrumental in influencing legal reforms in the Baltic States, notably enhancing judicial independence, minority rights, detention conditions, and due-process protections (Council of Europe, 2024). The Baltic Assembly often emphasizes the ECHR as a key element of democratic resilience, particularly regarding external authoritarian pressures and regional security issues, contending that compliance with Strasbourg norms bolsters public confidence in legal institutions and safeguards essential freedoms (Baltic Assembly, 2023). Via interparliamentary collaboration, the BA also promotes consistent execution of ECHR rulings throughout the region, reiterating its dedication to a cohesive human-rights system based on European standards.

6. General Information about the Baltic Assembly

6.1. Headquarters

The Baltic Assembly's headquarters can be found in Riga, Latvia, functioning as the organization's administrative and operational center. This site was selected for its central position in the Baltic area and its historical importance as a hub of culture and politics. The headquarters contains the Assembly's Secretariat, tasked with managing communications among member delegations, organizing plenary sessions and committee meetings, keeping records, and supporting inter-parliamentary initiatives. The Secretariat also plays a crucial role in facilitating the effective execution of resolutions and tracking the follow-up of recommendations made by the Assembly. Its team comprises legal advisors, policy specialists, and administrative staff that assist delegates in developing

legislative proposals and engaging in international collaboration activities (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

6.2. Membership

The Baltic Assembly consists of representatives from the national legislatures of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, with each nation allowed a delegation of as many as 17 members. Every delegation generally comprises both primary members and substitutes, chosen to mirror the political variety of their national parliaments, guaranteeing that all significant parties are represented in the Assembly. Membership is open to legislators without prior international experience; nonetheless, delegates are anticipated to participate actively in parliamentary committees, plenary sessions, and international discussions. This arrangement enables the BA to align national interests with regional goals, encouraging collaboration while honoring the sovereignty and domestic concerns of every member state (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

6.3. Leaders

The Baltic Assembly's leadership includes a Chairperson, two Vice-Chairpersons, and Rapporteurs, all chosen each year by the plenary. The Chairperson leads plenary sessions, directs discussions, and guarantees that the Assembly’s procedures adhere to the set rules. Vice-Chairpersons support the Chairperson in administrative tasks, committee coordination, and management of particular thematic initiatives. Rapporteurs are tasked with creating comprehensive reports on committee activities, writing resolutions, and delivering recommendations for approval. Leadership roles are periodically exchanged among the three member states to ensure equitable representation, with officeholders responsible for fostering discussions, resolving conflicts, and preserving the democratic and procedural integrity of the Assembly (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

6.4. Structure

The Baltic Assembly functions with a multi-layered organizational framework aimed at enhancing efficiency and providing focused attention to intricate policy fields. At the summit is the Plenary Assembly, which meets biannually to discuss important matters, ratify resolutions, and set the agenda for committee activities. Beneath the Plenary is the Presidium, made up of the Chairperson, Vice-Chairpersons, and committee leaders, which manages daily operations and guarantees the execution of Plenary resolutions. The committees concentrate on themes like Political Affairs, Economic Affairs, Security and Defence, Legal Affairs, and Culture and Education, enabling thorough analysis of legislation and alignment on particular policy issues. This framework guarantees that both strategic priorities and technical policy concerns are sufficiently addressed and promotes cooperation among the Baltic States on intricate, transboundary issues (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

6.5. Sessions

The Baltic Assembly convenes two regular plenary sessions each year, alternating among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These meetings offer an opportunity for delegates to address urgent regional matters, establish resolutions, and align legislative goals. Besides

the regular sessions, special sessions may be called to tackle urgent issues, like security emergencies, natural calamities, or significant international events. Meetings are thoughtfully organized to feature committee reports, expert presentations, and chances for open discussion, guaranteeing a thorough and inclusive method for making decisions. In addition to legislative discussions, meetings frequently include ceremonial and symbolic elements, emphasizing the unity and historical connections of the Baltic States (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

6.6. Committees

The Assembly functions through six permanent committees, each concentrating on a major policy sector:

Political Affairs

Economic Affairs

Legal Affairs

Culture and Education

Social Affairs and Health

Security and Defence

Committees consist of representatives from each of the three nations and can conduct regular meetings, workshops, and consultations with experts. Their duties include preparing reports, reviewing legislative proposals, and presenting suggestions to the Plenary Assembly. The committees interact with civil society, educational institutions, and global organizations, enabling the BA to integrate specialized knowledge and community feedback into its decision-making process. The Assembly guarantees efficiency and comprehensive analysis of various issues impacting the Baltic region by distributing tasks to specialized committees (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

6.7. Political Groupings

In the Baltic Assembly, delegates still represent their respective national political parties, yet they also create informal transnational political coalitions. These clusters enable individuals with common ideological views to work together on solutions, align policy stances, and create agreement among national delegations. Though official decision-making occurs via majority voting, political factions frequently significantly impact discussions and affect results, particularly regarding critical topics like security, human rights, and EU integration. This mechanism guarantees that a wide range of perspectives is taken into account while preserving the Assembly's overall efficiency and effectiveness in making decisions (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

7. Introduction to the First Agenda Item: Enhancing the Effective

Allocation and Monitoring of EU Structural and Cohesion Funds

The Structural and Cohesion Funds of the European Union are a key element of regional policy, focused on decreasing economic inequalities and fostering sustainable development within member states. For the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—these funds serve as vital tools for enhancing infrastructure projects, fostering innovation, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring environmental protection. Efficient distribution and oversight of these resources are crucial to ensure that the goals of the EU's cohesion policy are achieved and that public confidence in the handling of EU funds stays strong. The Baltic Assembly acknowledges that inadequate distribution, poor supervision, and insufficient transparency may obstruct the socio-economic advantages of these initiatives, especially in rural or less developed regions (European Commission, 2023).

Additionally, the Assembly highlights that coordination among the three Baltic States is crucial to utilize best practices, prevent duplication, and maximize the effectiveness of EU investments. By means of parliamentary oversight, collaborative reporting, and the support of unified evaluation systems, the Assembly aims to improve accountability and foster evidence-driven decision-making. It is vital to direct Structural and Cohesion Funds toward projects with significant development potential for national prosperity and regional integration, thus aligning the priorities of the Baltic States with wider EU strategic goals (OECD, 2022).

7.1. Structural and Cohesion Fund Distribution

The allocation of Structural and Cohesion Funds among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is based on a mix of objective economic metrics and strategic priorities set by the EU. The distribution of funds is shaped by GDP per capita, unemployment rates, and regional development metrics, guaranteeing that resources are allocated to regions requiring investment the most. For instance, less urbanized areas typically get greater per-capita funding to enhance infrastructure, education, and social initiatives designed to minimize developmental inequalities. The Baltic Assembly has recognized that aligning the distribution framework among the three nations can enhance equity, promote regional unity, and enable more effective multi-national initiatives tackling transnational issues like environmental sustainability, digital connectivity, and energy efficiency (European Court of Auditors, 2021).

Moreover, inter-governmental collaboration guarantees that allocation choices are both technically valid and politically recognized. Coordination methods involve multi-tiered discussions among national ministries, regional development bodies, and local authorities. This collaboration seeks to merge local needs with national strategies and EU directives, offering a balanced method that fosters inclusivity and sustainable results. Members of the Baltic Assembly are crucial in assessing these mechanisms, promoting fair funding methods, and overseeing if the funds provided meet their expected outcomes (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

7.1.1. Allocation Criteria and Mechanism

The distribution of EU Structural and Cohesion Funds is directed by a mix of quantitative and qualitative standards designed to focus on regions that require development the most. Quantitative factors encompass GDP per capita, unemployment rates, population density, and shortcomings in infrastructure. Qualitative evaluations take into account the sustainability of suggested initiatives, likely social effects, and their coherence with EU strategic goals, including digital transformation, climate action, and regional integration (European Commission, 2023). Through the integration of these strategies, the Baltic States can focus on initiatives that enhance developmental outcomes while promoting fair growth throughout all areas.

The process of allocating funds usually consists of competitive proposal requests, multi-step assessments, and scoring frameworks. Every project is evaluated for its feasibility, financial sustainability, and potential impact on regional development goals. National bodies, regional development organizations, and independent specialists engage in the assessment, guaranteeing that the process is both technically robust and politically valid. By employing this organized method, the Baltic Assembly aims to improve transparency and foster public trust in the allocation of funds (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

Additionally, the harmonization of allocation practices across nations in the Baltic region facilitates the sharing of best practices and enhances the monitoring of projects spanning multiple countries. Examining the allocation methods of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania allows the Assembly to recognize common issues, establish uniform assessment processes, and encourage initiatives that may act as regional examples. This method enhances efficiency while also strengthening cooperation between member states in accordance with EU cohesion goals (OECD, 2022).

7.1.2. Audit and Compliance Systems

Audit and compliance frameworks are essential to guarantee that EU funds are utilized effectively, transparently, and in line with legal obligations. Every Baltic State possesses internal audit departments, financial regulators, and external oversight agencies tasked with supervising project execution. At the EU level, the European Court of Auditors performs objective assessments to determine if distributed funds meet expected results and adhere to EU rules (European Court of Auditors, 2021). These systems function as safeguards that uphold accountability, prevent misuse, and guarantee the enduring sustainability of financed initiatives.

The Baltic Assembly highlights the importance of coordinating audits across nations, especially for initiatives that engage several Baltic States or involve cooperation between countries. Uniform reporting templates, collaborative audit protocols, and consistent information sharing among national authorities improve efficiency and enable thorough oversight. This collaboration allows for collective addressing of issues identified in one nation, thus reducing risks and enhancing overall fund governance (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

Strengthening capacity is another essential aspect of compliance systems. Through

training programs for auditors, project managers, and local implementers, the Assembly and national authorities improve awareness of EU requirements and bolster project management skills. This strategy for building capacity guarantees that projects meet regulatory standards while also delivering measurable socio-economic benefits, enhancing the trust in EU funds and parliamentary oversight systems (OECD, 2022).

7.1.3. Transparency Challenges in Rural Projects

Rural and remote areas encounter distinct transparency obstacles stemming from restricted administrative capabilities, scattered populations, and intricate stakeholder engagement. Initiatives in these sectors frequently engage several municipal agencies, NGOs, and private contractors, potentially leading to deficiencies in oversight and reporting. These obstacles raise the likelihood of inefficiencies, postponed implementation, and public distrust, especially if the community believes that funds are unfairly allocated (European Court of Auditors, 2021).

To reduce these risks, the Baltic Assembly suggests improved transparency strategies, such as publicly available reporting platforms, digital oversight systems, and inclusive governance processes. By making project proposals, budgets, and progress reports available online, local communities and civil society participants can effectively participate in oversight, offering feedback and ensuring accountability for implementers. These actions encourage transparency, enhance credibility, and bolster public confidence in the management of EU funds.

Moreover, parliamentary involvement is essential for tackling issues of transparency in rural areas. Site visits, discussions with stakeholders, and community hearings enable delegates to evaluate project execution in the field, recognize possible obstacles, and confirm integration with local requirements. Through the combination of technological resources and human supervision, the Baltic Assembly can enhance transparency, accountability, and fairness in rural development initiatives, guaranteeing that EU funds achieve optimal socio-economic advantages (Baltic Assembly, 2023; OECD, 2022).

7.2. Anti-Corruption Frameworks

Since the early 1990s, anti-corruption frameworks in the Baltic States have seen significant advancements by incorporating EU standards, GRECO suggestions, and local governance reforms. These frameworks integrate legislative, institutional, and technological strategies designed to minimize corruption risks in public administration, public procurement, and political funding. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have established extensive national anti-corruption strategies focusing on prevention, enforcement, and collaboration among agencies (GRECO, 2023). These frameworks promote structural reforms essential for the efficient utilization of EU Structural and Cohesion Funds by adhering to EU standards of transparency and accountability.

A key element of the Baltic anti-corruption framework is the alignment of national laws with European Union regulations, especially concerning the prevention of fraud, conflicts of interest, and the misuse of public resources. The Baltic States have established

integrity frameworks within public institutions that encompass required asset declarations, regulations on political party financing, and conflict-of-interest monitoring for both elected and appointed officials (European Commission, 2022). These systems create a thorough regulatory framework that improves supervision and diminishes chances for corruption.

Regional collaboration enhances the anti-corruption frameworks in the Baltic region. The three states utilize the Baltic Assembly and various European networks to share effective strategies, exchange information, and synchronize efforts on cross-border corruption investigations. This cooperative aspect is becoming more crucial for overseeing EU-financed projects, which frequently include multi-national collaborations. The Baltic States enhance a multi-layered, strong anti-corruption system by combining national and regional initiatives (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

7.2.1. National Procurement laws and Reforms

Public procurement frameworks in the Baltic States have experienced ongoing modernization to enhance transparency, equity, and competition. Procurement legislation in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania closely follows EU Procurement Directives 2014/24/EU and 2014/25/EU, setting stringent regulations for announcing tenders, choosing suppliers, forming contracts, and disclosing conflicts of interest. These reforms guarantee that procurement procedures adhere to strict standards of legality and accountability, particularly in initiatives financed by EU Structural and Cohesion Funds (European Commission, 2023).

Since the 2000s, all three nations have implemented extensive reforms to lower corruption risks in public procurement. This includes more rigid eligibility criteria, improved documentation standards, and independent review processes that enable unsuccessful bidders to contest procurement results. Latvia and Lithuania established dedicated procurement oversight agencies that perform real-time supervision of major tenders, whereas Estonia has incorporated procurement review roles into its national audit framework (OECD, 2021).

Digitalization has significantly impacted the transformation of procurement practices. All Baltic States currently utilize centralized e-procurement platforms—like Estonia's Riigihangete Register and Latvia's EIS system—which offer transparent access to tender details, contract awards, and supplier databases. These systems greatly diminish chances for manipulation by restricting direct human involvement and guaranteeing complete traceability of purchasing decisions. Digital procurement enhances cross-border collaboration, promoting increased transparency and efficiency in regional initiatives (European Commission, 2023).

7.2.2. Role of Anti-Corruption Agencies

Anti-corruption agencies in the Baltic countries act as the foundational support for national integrity frameworks. The Special Investigation Service of Lithuania (STT), the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau of Latvia (KNAB), and the Internal

Security Service of Estonia (KAPO) each function under mandates that encompass investigation, prevention, public education, and policy coordination (STT, 2023). Despite variations in their institutional frameworks, these agencies are essential in exposing corruption networks, overseeing political funding, and enforcing adherence to national anti-corruption laws.

In addition to enforcement, these agencies play a significant role in the preventive aspect of anti-corruption policy. They carry out risk evaluations for public entities, provide recommendations on managing conflicts of interest, and work closely with procurement agencies to identify irregularities in EU-funded initiatives. The insights from their reports are valuable for policymakers, allowing for evidence-based reforms that enhance governance systems (KNAB, 2023).

Collaboration between the Baltic anti-corruption agencies has grown stronger via regional networks and EU programs like OLAF and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). Collaborative training initiatives, data-sharing arrangements, and international investigations aid in tackling complex financial crimes that cross national boundaries. This collaborative strategy guarantees that corruption threats are tackled both locally and at the regional level, bolstering the integrity of collective economic and development efforts (OLAF, 2022).

7.2.3. Whistleblower Protection Legislation

Legislation for whistleblower protection has emerged as a crucial component of anti-corruption strategies in the Baltic region, particularly following the implementation of the EU Whistleblower Protection Directive (2019/1937). Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have enacted national legislation that protects individuals who expose corruption, fraud, or significant breaches of EU regulatory norms. These regulations require the creation of secure reporting avenues within public institutions and private organizations, allowing whistleblowers to disclose misconduct without the risk of reprisals (European Commission, 2023).

Alongside legal safeguards, the Baltic States have dedicated resources to creating institutional support frameworks for whistleblowers. Organizations like KNAB and STT now have specialized reporting platforms that facilitate anonymous reports and offer information on whistleblower protections. Campaigns aimed at raising public awareness also motivate people to step forward, highlighting that whistleblowing serves as a civic contribution to transparency and effective governance (STT, 2023).

Although advancements have been made, obstacles persist in guaranteeing the effective use of whistleblower systems, especially in rural and small communities where concerns about social or professional backlash are more intense. The Baltic Assembly fosters regional collaboration and the sharing of best practices to enhance cultural acceptance of whistleblowing and bolster protections in industries more prone to corruption. By building trust in reporting systems, the Baltic States enhance their resilience to the misuse of EU funds and public resources (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

7.2.4. Digitalisation and Open-Data Initiatives

Digitalisation has revolutionized anti-corruption initiatives in the Baltic area, facilitating enhanced oversight, quicker identification of anomalies, and better public information access. Estonia, acknowledged as a worldwide leader in digital governance, has created e-governance tools that enable secure data sharing, automated auditing, and transparent management of contracts (OECD, 2022). Latvia and Lithuania have also adopted digital tools in procurement, budget management, and the delivery of public services. These efforts lessen administrative loads while enhancing the accountability of financial and political choices.

Open-data platforms represent a crucial element of Baltic digital frameworks aimed at combating corruption. By making procurement data, budget expenditures, political contributions, and institutional performance indicators publicly available online, the Baltic States improve civic monitoring and enable journalists, researchers, and NGOs to independently scrutinize government activities. These platforms enable civil society to detect irregularities more rapidly and foster a culture of transparency (European Commission, 2023).

Digitalization enhances regional collaboration. Using interoperable platforms, the Baltic States share procurement records, financial information, and risk assessments, facilitating cross-border investigations and monitoring of multi-country projects. These digital tools establish a cohesive transparency framework that enhances accountability and mitigates corruption risks in both EU-funded and national projects. With the ongoing progress of digital governance, the Baltic area stands as an example of creative anti-corruption measures in the EU (Baltic Assembly, 2023).

7.3. European Oversight and Enforcement

European supervision and enforcement systems form the core of governance quality throughout the EU, especially in areas of policy that involve considerable financial transfers like the Structural and Cohesion Funds. At the heart of this system is the European Commission, which oversees Member States' management and control systems via audits, compliance assessments, and yearly performance evaluations. The Commission assesses if national bodies effectively prevent, identify, and rectify irregularities—particularly those related to procurement fraud, conflicts of interest, and improper use of EU funds (European Commission, 2023). This supervisory framework is based on the concept of "co-managed oversight," indicating that although national entities are mainly accountable for executing funds, the Commission holds the authority to intervene whenever systemic flaws or breaches of EU law occur. It can halt payments, enforce financial adjustments, or mandate Member States to reform inadequate administrative systems. This results in a multi-tier governance framework where national oversight organizations must align with supranational standards, thus enhancing accountability measures throughout the Baltic States and beyond.

A network of specialized EU bodies backs the European Commission's supervisory role,

aimed at protecting financial integrity and ensuring adherence to Union law. At the forefront is the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), which carries out independent probes into alleged fraud, corruption, and cross-border irregularities. OLAF's powers span all Member States, enabling it to examine financial transactions, review procurement activities, and partner with national enforcement bodies without political obstruction (OLAF, 2022). Supporting OLAF is the European Court of Auditors (ECA), which serves as the EU's external audit body. The ECA conducts performance audits, compliance assessments, and system evaluations that assess not only the legality of expenditures but also whether EU programs achieve significant outcomes and lasting worth. Moreover, the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) represented a notable enhancement of enforcement powers. EPPO probes and prosecutes offenses impacting the EU's financial interests—such as procurement fraud, VAT fraud, and misuse of EU funds—via its network of appointed European prosecutors integrated into national judiciary systems (EPPO, 2023). For the Baltic States, joining these supranational organizations improves both deterrence and investigative capacity, preventing financial crimes with cross-border aspects from taking advantage of jurisdictional loopholes. The Commission, OLAF, ECA, and EPPO collectively establish a cohesive and mutually supportive enforcement framework that encourages stringent management of EU funds, safeguards taxpayer interests, and maintains the rule of law throughout the Union.

European oversight and enforcement systems go beyond rigid financial regulations and are closely linked to wider rule-of-law values, democratic accountability, and institutional clarity. The 2020 Conditionality Regulation marks a significant breakthrough: it allows the European Union to halt funding when fundamental rule-of-law shortcomings jeopardize the effective financial administration of EU resources (European Council, 2020). This framework highlights the EU's acknowledgment that corruption, judicial manipulation, and political meddling in oversight institutions are not just internal governance problems—they pose direct threats to the Union's financial integrity. Through this mechanism, Member States are required to show the autonomy of their judiciary, the efficacy of anti-corruption bodies, and the trustworthiness of administrative systems managing EU funds. The conditionality framework serves as a protective measure for the Baltic States, which enjoy strong rule-of-law standings compared to many EU counterparts, bolstering their governance benchmarks and shielding them from competitive drawbacks due to less stringent oversight in other EU regions.

The European Parliament and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) enhance the monitoring system by ensuring legal and political responsibility. The Parliament conducts democratic oversight via yearly discharge processes, budget oversight reports, and hearings with the Commission and various EU agencies. It has consistently promoted increased transparency in cohesion policy, advocating for more open-data mandates, improved whistleblower safeguards, and better public access to procurement details (European Parliament, 2022). At the same time, the CJEU acts as the ultimate authority on compliance, resolving conflicts between EU institutions and Member States, interpreting EU financial laws, and deciding on infringement actions

started by the Commission. Its legal decisions have defined essential criteria for procurement equity, conflict-of-interest avoidance, and adherence to state-aid regulations —legal principles that directly influence national regulatory systems. Together, the Parliament and CJEU guarantee that supervision is not solely administrative and financial but also democratic and judicial, strengthening the multifaceted character of EU governance.

Additionally, European regulation increasingly utilizes technological advancements. The Early Detection and Exclusion System (EDES) of the EU monitors organizations engaged in fraudulent or unethical activities, barring them from taking part in upcoming EU-funded initiatives (European Commission, 2023). In the same way, the Arachne data-mining system utilized by Member States for tracking procurement and beneficiary risk signals uses algorithms to uncover irregularities, highlight possible conflicts, and pinpoint high-risk contractors. These instruments enhance national digitalization efforts, especially in the Baltic States, where e-governance frameworks enable smooth data-sharing with EU regulatory agencies. While the EU progresses in updating its enforcement framework, the Baltic States emerge as outstanding partners, as their digital readiness and administrative expertise facilitate effective integration with supranational systems. In total, European supervision and enforcement systems—including financial audits, legal judgment, anti-fraud efforts, democratic oversight, and digital surveillance—create a sophisticated monitoring framework that guarantees transparency, integrity, and accountability throughout all tiers of EU governance.

7.4. Domestic Accountability and Civil Monitoring

Domestic accountability and civil oversight are essential in guaranteeing that EU Structural and Cohesion Funds are utilized efficiently, transparently, and in accordance with the development priorities of the Baltic States. In contrast to the strictly top-down control imposed by European institutions, domestic accountability systems feature national parliaments, state audit offices, independent ombudsman institutions, public procurement agencies, and courts tasked with reviewing administrative decisions. These entities function based on the principle of subsidiarity: the notion that the responsibility for supervision lies mainly with Member States, and only when national mechanisms are ineffective does supranational intervention become required (European Commission, 2023). For effective domestic accountability, robust institutional independence, sufficient budgetary resources, and legal frameworks are essential to enable national authorities to investigate, penalize, and prevent irregularities. In the Baltic States — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — this structure is backed by relatively high rule-of-law metrics and robust traditions of e-governance, which collectively enhance both transparency and public access to governmental information. When operating effectively, these systems reduce risks like procurement fraud, political favoritism, conflicts of interest, or inefficiencies in regional development initiatives.

Civil monitoring enhances formal accountability mechanisms by incorporating societal participants—NGOs, journalists, academic institutions, and citizen watchdog organizations—into the governance framework. The participation of civil society

enhances democratic legitimacy, expands access to local expertise, and guarantees that communities impacted by EU-funded initiatives have a means to express their concerns. In the Baltic States, NGOs focused on corruption prevention, environmental monitoring, public procurement transparency, and regional development are becoming more influential in contesting dubious tenders, seeking public documents, and partnering with global watchdogs like Transparency International and the Open Government Partnership. Media organizations—particularly investigative journalism platforms—act as essential watchdogs, frequently revealing mismanagement or political interference in EU-financed infrastructure projects, rural development initiatives, or municipal procurement activities. Since these actors function autonomously from political entities, they assist in mitigating possible conflicts of interest, particularly in smaller states where political networks might be tightly interconnected.

Domestic accountability and civil oversight enhance one another: audits and parliamentary investigations often lead to media probes, while reports from civil society can initiate official state inquiries or parliamentary sessions. The digital strategies of the Baltic States further enhance this synergy. Estonia's public procurement databases, Lithuania's e-procurement system (CVP IS), and Latvia's open-data portals enable civil society, journalists, and researchers to monitor spending, contractor records, and performance metrics in real time. These advancements significantly decrease the lack of transparency that usually characterizes extensive development initiatives. Still, obstacles persist. Organizations in the region often encounter constrained funding, political influence, and inadequate access to comprehensive contract documents. Local authorities, especially in rural regions, might continue to be resistant to community oversight. Thus, enhancing domestic accountability involves more than merely legal changes; it necessitates a cultural dedication to transparency and an environment where state institutions and civil actors view oversight not as a hindrance but as a vital aspect of democratic governance.

7.4.1. Parliamentary Committees and Civil Audits

Parliamentary committees represent one of the most influential internal monitoring mechanisms for guaranteeing the appropriate utilization of EU Structural and Cohesion Funds. In democratic systems, parliaments ensure the executive is accountable by assessing policy execution, reviewing budget reports, interrogating ministers, and calling upon agencies that manage EU funds. In the Baltic States, these responsibilities are handled by dedicated committees, including Estonia’s State Budget Control Select Committee, Latvia’s Public Expenditure and Audit Committee, and Lithuania’s Committee on Audit. These entities assess adherence to EU regulations, oversee procurement practices, and determine if funded projects fulfill socio-economic development goals. Parliamentary oversight goes beyond just financial accuracy; it also involves assessing the effectiveness of policies and confirming that government actions are in line with national strategies for competitiveness, digitalization, and regional cohesion (Raudla & Savi, 2021). Parliaments consistently apply pressure on the executive to ensure transparency and address shortcomings highlighted in audit reports via

hearings, inquiries, and legislative modifications.

Civil audits, carried out by supreme audit institutions (SAIs), independent ombudsman entities, municipal controllers, and procurement monitors, serve as the technical foundation for domestic accountability. In the Baltic region, these entities consist of the Estonian National Audit Office, the Latvian State Audit Office, and the Lithuanian National Audit Office. These entities are constitutionally autonomous and authorized to examine state institutions, municipalities, state-owned companies, and NGO recipients of EU funds (SAO Latvia, 2023). Their evaluations offer in-depth analyses of financial oversight, cost-effectiveness, operational efficiency, and adherence to regulations. Significantly, Baltic SAIs engage proactively with the European Court of Auditors and OLAF, exchanging risk indicators, procurement irregularities, and forensic audit information. Their discoveries frequently lead to parliamentary investigations, administrative penalties, or criminal probes. The professional development of these audit institutions—alongside cutting-edge digital technologies like e-audit systems and instant procurement oversight—has positioned the Baltic States as regional frontrunners in public-sector transparency.

The success of parliamentary committees and civil audits relies on political commitment, administrative collaboration, and availability of comprehensive information. Committees cannot perform effective oversight when ministries do not supply documents, postpone responses, or claim confidentiality. In the same way, SAIs encounter challenges when audit recommendations go unheeded, or when municipalities oppose oversight because of political patronage connections. The Baltic States have substantially advanced in establishing audit follow-up mechanisms, enforcing obligatory reports on the execution of audit recommendations, and openly sharing performance audit summaries. Collaboration between parliamentary committees and civil audit institutions boosts transparency: committees use audit findings as credible sources, while SAIs gain from parliamentary influence that forces ministries to address identified shortcomings. This layered domestic monitoring system guarantees that EU funds adhere to legal standards and produce quantifiable developmental results.

7.4.2. NGO and Media Participation

Non-governmental entities and media participants are essential foundations of civil oversight in the Baltic States, providing impartial examination that enhances official monitoring systems. Organizations focused on anti-corruption, transparency in public procurement, environmental sustainability, and local development have a notably significant role. Groups like the Latvian branch of Transparency International, the Estonian Open Society Institute, and Lithuanian civic watchdog platforms consistently analyze procurement records, budget reports, and environmental impact evaluations. Their work includes public awareness initiatives and policy analysis, as well as oversight of EU-funded contracts, particularly in areas such as infrastructure, IT advancement, and rural development projects (Transparency International Latvia, 2022). NGOs serve as communicative intermediaries, converting intricate administrative details into understandable analyses for the public and recommending reforms that enhance

regulatory structures. NGOs typically operate autonomously from the government, allowing them to be the first to detect conflicts of interest, collusion in bidding, or political sway in local procurement procedures.

The media acts as a vital overseer by performing investigative journalism, revealing mismanagement, and monitoring the fulfillment of promises made by EU-funded projects. Baltic media organizations—including Postimees (Estonia), Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji (Latvia), and the LRT Investigative Team (Lithuania)—have consistently revealed instances of corruption, procurement discrepancies, and fund misappropriation linked to local administrations and private suppliers. Investigative reporters often partner with global organizations such as OCCRP, enhancing the influence of their discoveries and offering transnational perspectives on illegal financial systems. Media examination frequently initiates formal investigations, parliamentary inquiries, or administrative reviews, highlighting its crucial function in protecting EU funds. The robust constitutional safeguards for press freedom in the Baltic States, alongside a high level of digital literacy and significant public confidence in media institutions, foster a conducive environment for thorough investigative journalism.

Even with their vital roles, NGOs and media encounter structural obstacles that could impede their ability to effectively oversee EU cohesion expenditures. Funding constraints continue to be a persistent issue; numerous NGOs depend on project-specific grants, leading to unpredictability and limiting long-term evaluation efforts. Certain local administrations or political figures might seek to weaken civil society organizations by limiting access to information, branding oversight groups as politically skewed, or launching strategic lawsuits against journalists (SLAPPs). Moreover, in spite of advancements in transparency portals, some procurement or subcontracting information continues to be challenging to obtain because of confidentiality regulations or disjointed data systems. Nonetheless, the Baltic States maintain a relatively strong position within the EU regarding civic oversight abilities, primarily because of their solid e-governance framework. Open-data platforms, public procurement websites, and digital access legislation enable NGOs and journalists to examine data with unmatched breadth and effectiveness. When paired with public pressure and international cooperation, NGO and media involvement enhances deterrence, bolsters the integrity of EU-funded initiatives, and fosters democratic accountability throughout the Baltic region.

7.5. Cross-Baltic Evaluation and Future Reform

The cross-Baltic assessment of transparency, governance integrity, and public accountability systems highlights the advancements made by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania since joining the EU, as well as the ongoing vulnerabilities that still influence domestic political dynamics. Despite the three countries having a shared normative commitment to rule-of-law principles, digital openness, and EU-aligned administrative standards, their institutional capacities vary greatly, resulting in an uneven environment of reform depth and sustainability. Estonia exemplifies the leading model for digital governance and institutional transparency, having pioneered a system where administrative choices, procurement agreements, and political funding information are

consistently digitized and available for public search. Latvia and Lithuania, although making consistent progress, still face challenges from structural legacies, including politicized appointments, divided anti-corruption agencies, and public skepticism regarding institutions. This variation across nations highlights the necessity for synchronized, regional assessment frameworks that extend beyond national standards and focus on common vulnerabilities, especially in domains like cross-border procurement, regional security systems, and information integrity.

A key element influencing future reform throughout the Baltic region is the external geopolitical landscape. The closeness to Russia, exposure to hybrid threats, and the overarching security framework of NATO and the EU indicate that transparency reforms are not solely administrative; they are closely tied to national resilience. Consequently, cross-Baltic assessment systems should more fully incorporate security-oriented criteria: the openness of military procurement processes, the robustness of cyber infrastructure choices, the oversight of political funding from foreign-affiliated entities, and the safeguarding of press freedom amid information warfare. These challenges go beyond national boundaries and consequently require unified strategies. Moreover, Baltic collaboration needs to go beyond occasional information sharing and develop into a formalized, systematic framework. A persistent issue is the uneven application of suggestions generated by regional working groups or EU audit teams; reforms frequently halt due to shifts in domestic politics, bureaucratic resistance, or lacking financial support. Creating a cohesive Baltic framework that consistently tracks implementation advancement—backed by aligned legislative benchmarks, uniform reporting formats, and mutual enforcement mechanisms—would enable the three countries to transition from comparative analysis to collaborative change.

Ultimately, future reform relies on enhancing public involvement and guaranteeing that transparency frameworks are available to citizens instead of functioning as technocratic systems comprehensible solely by specialists. Despite significant digital modernization in the Baltic region, public involvement is still inconsistent, particularly among rural areas, minority-language groups, and older demographics. Consequently, future reform strategies across the Baltic region must include participatory tools like multilingual reporting platforms, cross-border civic hackathons, and public oversight portals tailored to various digital literacy levels. Collaboration among universities, civil society, investigative media, and digital governance organizations could significantly contribute to developing an environment where transparency is perpetually examined, discussed, and enhanced. In this regard, forthcoming reform entails more than just creating new regulations; it necessitates cultivating a common regional culture of accountability where public expectations, administrative standards, and technological resources function to enhance consistency among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

7.5.1. Comperative Successes and Failures

A comparative evaluation of achievements in the Baltic states showcases a number of governance innovations that have received global acknowledgment. Estonia's digital governance framework is regarded as the most sophisticated in Europe and has emerged

as an international benchmark for secure digital identification, e-governance systems, and transparent public services. The Estonian approach demonstrates how early implementation of unified digital registries, blockchain-supported audit trails, and required online disclosure of government transactions can effectively diminish chances for corruption. Lithuania has made significant advancements in bolstering its anti-corruption agencies, especially after comprehensive reforms implemented following the judicial corruption scandal of 2018. These changes boosted judicial transparency, improved parliamentary scrutiny, and strengthened collaboration with EU anti-money laundering agencies. Latvia's primary achievement is its increasing partnership with investigative journalism networks, enabling media personnel to oversee procurement choices and expose irregularities in political funding. In all three states, adherence to EU directives—especially regarding whistleblower protection, public procurement, and the prevention of foreign interference—has significantly propelled modernization.

However, the comparative analysis also uncovers persistent shortcomings and structural flaws. Even with robust digital infrastructures, all three nations still face challenges related to political appointment practices that compromise the neutrality of independent oversight organizations. In Latvia and Lithuania, anti-corruption agencies frequently encounter resource deficiencies, internal divisions, or legal uncertainties that constrain their operational independence. Estonia, despite having robust institutions, is experiencing growing worries about the dominance of private digital service providers and outsourcing methods that centralize essential governance instruments within a limited number of firms, resulting in possible weaknesses in accountability. Furthermore, while judicial independence is formally assured, it is hindered by protracted case processing durations, inconsistent disciplinary measures, and public doubt—particularly in Latvia, where scandals have occasionally undermined institutional trust.

A prevalent issue throughout the Baltic region is the insufficient incorporation of transparency tools into wider societal structures. Possessing advanced technology does not automatically guarantee effective civic supervision. Rural areas and elderly populations frequently lack the digital skills needed to effectively interact with online purchasing platforms or political funding databases. Moreover, populations that speak minority languages—particularly Russian-speaking groups—might encounter language obstacles when trying to obtain essential public information. This results in areas of disengagement that can be leveraged by disinformation networks or foreign entities. Moreover, all three states encounter ongoing weaknesses in public procurement, especially regarding the health sector, infrastructure ventures, and EU-funded development programs. Regional coordination is still restricted; while Baltic collaboration is present in theory, the actual integration of enforcement mechanisms has fallen behind. In the absence of a cohesive standard for data formatting, auditing schedules, or international investigative prompts, the potential for corruption in cross-border contracts continues to be inadequately overseen.

Ultimately, the comparative shortcomings of the Baltic states highlight the necessity for coordinated reforms instead of individual national advancements. Transparency

challenges are becoming more cross-border in nature—spanning from cyber threats to money-laundering networks—thus necessitating unified regional standards. The lack of a lasting, adequately funded regional oversight system continues to be one of the biggest barriers to ongoing advancement. Tackling these common deficiencies requires political determination, cross-sector collaboration, and an acknowledgment that the legitimacy of Baltic democracies relies not just on domestic reforms but also on their joint ability to establish a robust, transparent, and cohesive regional governance framework.

7.5.2. Regional Task-Force Proposol

A detailed regional task force focused on transparency and accountability stands as one of the most promising ways to enhance Baltic governance standards beyond their existing national constraints. The suggested task force would function as a permanent, established framework connecting Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, tasked with coordinating cross-border inquiries, standardizing procurement supervision, and overseeing political funding throughout the area. In contrast to current ad hoc working groups, this task force would have formal decision-making power, a legally established mandate, and assured funding for multiple years. Its framework would incorporate specialists from anti-corruption agencies, data-protection authorities, public procurement offices, and cyber-security divisions. The task-force would also uphold a secure, collaborative digital platform facilitating real-time sharing of documents, audit findings, risk evaluations, and early-warning signs connected to unusual procurement behaviors or foreign-funded political actions. This kind of platform would assist in removing existing obstacles to data-sharing created by incompatible formats, confidentiality regulations, or varying national reporting standards.

The task-force's effectiveness would rely on creating specialized sub-units focused on significant areas of weakness. A Cross-Border Procurement Integrity Unit would concentrate on agreements that include various Baltic nations, EU structural funds, and infrastructure initiatives associated with energy, transportation, and defense. This unit would handle joint audits, validate contractor backgrounds, and oversee bidding processes to guarantee adherence to EU-wide standards. A Regional Political Financing Oversight Unit would monitor the influx of money into political parties, civic groups, and media outlets, spotting trends that could suggest foreign influence or organized disinformation efforts. In the meantime, a Cyber-Governance and Information Integrity Unit would tackle digital vulnerabilities, guaranteeing that e-procurement platforms, digital identity systems, and online transparency tools stay secure and untainted by manipulation. The task force's organizational structure would also feature a Public Engagement and Civil Society Liaison Office, responsible for engaging NGOs, investigative journalists, academic scholars, and minority-language groups in the monitoring process.

The success of the regional task force hinges on the implementation of robust enforcement measures. Member states would engage in a yearly review process where the task force assesses their adherence to transparency standards and provides mandatory recommendations. Failure to comply could lead to escalating actions such as required

corrective action plans or referral to EU bodies for extra supervision. The task-force would additionally release a yearly “State of Baltic Transparency Report,” offering comprehensive evaluations of advancements, new challenges, and required reforms. To guarantee independence, leadership roles ought to be filled via merit-based selection processes supervised by an independent panel of experts from regional and EU levels, thus reducing political influence. The task-force would also organize training programs, cross-border workshops, and technical assistance efforts aimed at enhancing administrative skills in fields like forensic auditing, cyber security, and risk-based procurement analysis.

Additionally, the task-force ought to implement a multilingual communication approach, providing resources in Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Russian to enhance public outreach and address language barriers in civic supervision. Through the combination of technological advancements and collaborative efforts among institutions, the task force would convert Baltic governance from a series of individual national reforms into a unified regional structure. In the end, this proposal frames transparency not as a standalone administrative objective but as a fundamental element of regional security, economic stability, and democratic strength amid changing geopolitical challenges.

7.5.3. Long-Term Funding Trasnparency

Transparency in long-term funding is essential for maintaining the sustainability and integrity of anti-corruption reforms throughout the Baltic area. Although Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have achieved significant advancements in harmonizing their financial governance frameworks with EU benchmarks, the sustainability of these reforms is questionable unless funding strategies are shielded from political shifts, changes in administration, and economic variations. Current transparency frameworks frequently depend on yearly budget allocations that may be easily cut during political shifts or economic declines. To tackle this weakness, a multi-tiered funding structure is necessary —one that combines national budgets, EU financial tools, and independent oversight resources. Creating legally protected financial sources for anti-corruption agencies, auditing entities, public procurement oversight units, and transparency-focused digital infrastructure would shield their functions from political interference. Moreover, long-term financial support must be tied to performance indicators, allowing for ongoing assessment of resource efficiency and guaranteeing that funding boosts align with observable governance enhancements.

An essential aspect of enduring funding transparency is the establishment of publicly available financial disclosure systems that offer real-time insights into the expenditures on resources designated for transparency efforts. These systems would monitor spending on procurement oversight tools, programs for enhancing investigative capabilities, maintenance of digital infrastructure, and platforms for cross-border collaboration. Documenting, making searchable, and allowing third-party inspection of funding allocation processes would greatly diminish chances for mismanagement or misappropriation of funds. The Baltic states need to implement unified accounting standards to promote cross-border comparability and enhance external auditing. A

regional "Funding Transparency Dashboard" could act as a comprehensive platform for citizens, journalists, and EU institutions to track financial movements linked to governance reforms. Incorporating automated anomaly detection algorithms could enable the prompt detection of unusual spending, questionable financial trends, or possible efforts to sway oversight entities using specific funding distributions.

Furthermore, transparency in long-term funding necessitates broadening the sources of financial backing beyond government budgets. Collaborations with EU agencies, global donors, and independent research institutions could enhance the financial stability of transparency-related programs while reducing the likelihood of domestic takeover. Funds allocated for digital innovation—like upgrading e-procurement frameworks, strengthening cyber-security measures, or broadening artificial intelligence applications for risk-oriented auditing—would guarantee that Baltic governance structures stay technologically advanced. Simultaneously, stringent criteria should regulate the acceptance of outside funds to avoid conflicts of interest and protect institutional autonomy. An open donor registry, compulsory disclosure of all outside donations, and regular independent assessments would establish a safeguarding structure against inappropriate influence.

Over time, financial transparency in itself evolves into a kind of democratic resilience. By making funding distributions transparent, reliable, and protected from political uncertainties, the Baltic nations can bolster public confidence and enhance the legitimacy of their governance frameworks. Sustainable funding enables oversight institutions to operate efficiently while also fostering enduring civic participation. Educational programs, grants for investigative journalism, and community oversight efforts rely on consistent financial backing to uphold their function in democratic accountability. In the end, long-term funding transparency shifts the governance environment from reactive, crisis-induced changes to a stable, proactive system where transparency is a fundamental aspect rather than a fleeting focus.

8. Introduction to the Second Agenda Item: Advancing Judicial Independence and Legal Harmonization

The breakup of the Soviet Union resulted in the Baltic states inheriting legal systems marked by years of centralized authoritarian rule, strict formalism, and a legal framework molded by ideological alignment instead of constitutionalism, judicial independence, or democratic responsibility. Grasping the Soviet legal heritage is crucial for evaluating the path of judicial reform in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, especially since transitional justice in this area involved not only institutional restructuring but also a deep effort to rebuild the philosophical underpinnings of law. Central to this challenge was the enduring influence of historical continuity in legal culture: Soviet legal theory advanced a positivist, state-focused view of legality wherein courts served as tools of political control, and legal reasoning prioritized compliance with written norms rather than interpretative freedom or rights-centered judgment. This legacy meant that after gaining independence, the Baltic states acquired legal practitioners—judges, prosecutors, scholars—whose early education and professional identities were developed under a completely

different normative framework. Consequently, initial constitutional reforms faced challenges not only from structural shortcomings but also from entrenched legal mindsets that threatened to perpetuate authoritarian reasoning even within newly formed democratic systems.

A key aspect of transitional justice in the Baltics was thus the evaluation of judges from the Soviet period. Instead of choosing a drastic lustration that would completely cleanse the judiciary, the Baltic method pursued a compromise that weighed the necessity for accountability against the practical need for maintaining institutional continuity. Vetting commissions evaluated judges based on their professional behavior during Soviet times, their participation in political repression, and their commitment to fundamental judicial ethics. This procedure eliminated certain politically compromised individuals, but its greater significance resided in indicating a transition toward a judiciary based on public confidence and democratic validity. Nevertheless, the vetting process by itself was insufficient to counteract the impacts of Soviet legal education; thus, the education and re-education of legal practitioners became a crucial aspect of legal reform. Judges and attorneys encountered Western constitutionalism, the principle of separation of powers, adversarial trial doctrines, and European human rights benchmarks. Legal education programs were overhauled, international specialists were invited for judicial workshops, and the Baltic states quickly became part of regional legal frameworks, slowly substituting Soviet-era legal thought with contemporary comparative and international law methodologies.
Nevertheless, the establishment of the new legal system necessitated significant constitutional reform. The reforms to the constitution following independence aimed to guarantee judicial independence via structural protections like judicial councils, merit-based appointment processes, security of tenure, and constitutional review systems. Estonia and Latvia chose to implement constitutional courts, whereas Lithuania created a Constitutional Court with robust powers to annul laws that conflict with fundamental rights. These reforms not only established checks on executive and legislative power but also symbolically confirmed a clear departure from the Soviet model, in which courts were subordinate to political institutions and constitutions primarily served as declarative texts lacking binding legal authority. Significantly, constitutional reforms included protections for minority rights, freedom of speech, and access to justice—areas where Soviet law had been either muted or outright oppressive.

The concluding and most significant phase of the Baltic transition encompassed the European legal integration benchmarks, during which the region adjusted its legal frameworks to correspond with the acquis communautaire, the Copenhagen requirements, and the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. This integration required the implementation of new civil, criminal, and administrative procedure codes; strong anti-corruption measures; and improved judicial training initiatives to guarantee the correct application of EU law. The dominance and direct applicability of EU law brought about interpretative methods that compelled courts to adopt teleological reasoning and proportionality assessment—methods unfamiliar to Soviet legal practice. Additionally, involvement in European judicial networks promoted cross-border communication, peer

evaluation systems, and common standards of judicial ethics. Gradually, the alignment with European legal standards transformed both institutional practices and legal culture, diminishing remaining Soviet impacts and strengthening a rights-focused, autonomy-driven model of judicial administration.

8.1. Soviet Legal Legacy and Transitional Justice

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the Baltic states inheriting legal systems marked by years of centralized authoritarian rule, strict formalism, and a legal framework influenced more by ideological alignment than by constitutional principles, judicial independence, or democratic responsibility. Grasping the Soviet legal heritage is crucial for evaluating the path of judicial reform in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, especially since transitional justice in the area involved not just an institutional restructuring but also a significant effort to rebuild the philosophical underpinnings of law. Central to this challenge was the enduring presence of historical continuity in legal culture: Soviet legal theory fostered a positivist, state-focused view of legality in which courts acted as tools of political control, and legal reasoning prioritized conformity to codified norms rather than interpretive freedom or rights-based decision-making. This legacy meant that at independence, the Baltic states acquired legal professionals—judges, prosecutors, scholars—whose foundational training and professional identities had been developed within a completely different normative framework. Consequently, initial constitutional reforms needed to address both structural weaknesses and deeply rooted legal mindsets that threatened to perpetuate authoritarian modes of thinking even within newly formed democratic systems.

A key component of transitional justice in the Baltics was thus the evaluation of judges from the Soviet period. Instead of choosing a complete lustration that would entirely cleanse the judiciary, the Baltic strategy aimed for a compromise that weighed the necessity for accountability against the practical need for institutional continuity. Vetting commissions evaluated judges based on their professional behavior during Soviet rule, their participation in political persecution, and their commitment to fundamental judicial ethics. Although this process eliminated certain politically compromised individuals, its greater significance resided in indicating a shift towards a judiciary founded on public trust and democratic legitimacy. Nevertheless, the vetting process by itself was insufficient to counteract the impact of Soviet legal training; thus, the education and retraining of legal practitioners became a crucial aspect of legal reform. Judges and attorneys encountered Western constitutionalism, the concept of separation of powers, principles of adversarial trials, and European human rights norms. Legal education programs were revised, international specialists were invited for judicial workshops, and the Baltic nations quickly assimilated into regional legal frameworks, slowly substituting Soviet-era legal knowledge with contemporary comparative and international law methods.

Nevertheless, the basis of the new legal framework demanded significant constitutional reorganization. The constitutional changes following independence aimed to guarantee judicial independence via structural protections like judicial councils, merit-based

appointment processes, job security, and constitutional review systems. Estonia and Latvia chose constitutional courts, whereas Lithuania created a Constitutional Court with substantial power to annul laws that conflict with fundamental rights. These reforms not only established safeguards on executive and legislative power but also symbolically represented a definitive separation from the Soviet model, where courts were subordinate to political entities and constitutions primarily served as declarative texts without enforceable legal authority. Significantly, constitutional reforms also included protections for minority rights, freedom of expression, and access to justice—areas where Soviet law had been either quiet or overtly oppressive.

The last and most significant phase of the Baltic transition included the European legal integration milestones, during which the region synchronized its legal frameworks with the acquis communautaire, the Copenhagen criteria, and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. This integration required the implementation of fresh civil, criminal, and administrative procedure codes; strong anti-corruption measures; and improved judicial training initiatives to guarantee accurate enforcement of EU law. The dominance and direct applicability of EU law brought about interpretative methods that necessitated courts to adopt teleological reasoning and proportionality analysis—concepts unfamiliar to Soviet legal principles. Furthermore, involvement in European judicial networks fostered cross-border communication, peer evaluation processes, and common standards of judicial ethics. As time progressed, the alignment with European legal standards transformed both institutional practices and legal culture, diminishing remaining Soviet impacts and strengthening a rights-centered, independence-focused approach to judicial governance.

8.1.1. Historical Continuity in Legal Culture

The ongoing influence of Soviet-era legal culture in the Baltic states poses a notable structural hurdle in shifting from authoritarian legality to European rule-of-law principles. While Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania reinstated or rebuilt their pre-war constitutional frameworks in the early 1990s, the underlying aspects of judicial culture—such as professional socialization, interpretive approaches, institutional hierarchies, and procedural routines—showed significant continuity with Soviet practices (Mälksoo, 2003). Soviet law was based on a teleological view of legality that placed courts under political control, creating a legal mindset where judicial discretion was limited and law functioned for administrative and ideological ends instead of acting as a check on state power (Ledeneva, 1998). The persistence of these conceptual frameworks indicated that, even with swift legislative changes, Soviet legal reasoning patterns remained influential in judicial practice during the initial decade of independence (Pettai & Pettai, 2015).

A key continuity related to the positivist interpretive framework that was fundamental to Soviet legal theory. Judges educated in the Soviet system learned to interpret statutory texts strictly, allowing little space for teleological or rights-oriented reasoning (Mälksoo, 2018). This positivist perspective was evident in early post-independence jurisprudence, where courts often grappled with proportionality evaluations and constitutional balancing

criteria brought in by European legal integration (European Commission, 2020). The transition from Soviet legal formalism to European constitutionalism necessitated significant professional retraining, but the ingrained interpretive practices continued, especially in lower courts where judges trained in the Soviet system remained the majority during the 1990s (Council of Europe Venice Commission, 1995).

Institutional culture showed significant continuity as well. Soviet courts operated as administrative bodies aimed at achieving state goals instead of serving as autonomous judges (Åslund, 2002). This instilled a bureaucratic culture marked by hierarchical decision-making, respect for prosecutorial power, and minimal adversarial involvement (OSCE, 1999). Following independence, although constitutional reforms ensured judicial independence, the actual application of these principles was limited by inherited institutional practices, resource constraints, and established administrative routines (Raudla, 2013). Consequently, judicial conduct during the initial transition phase frequently exhibited a wary and risk-averse stance, influenced by years when straying from institutional norms could lead to punitive repercussions.

An additional source of continuity came from the structure of the judiciary. The majority of judges trained in the Soviet system were kept because it was nearly impossible to replace the whole corps without causing instability in the judicial system (Pettai & Pettai, 2015). This resulted in a mixed professional atmosphere where newly educated, Western-focused legal practitioners joined organizations still influenced by Soviet-era knowledge standards. The presence of these two generations resulted in diverse jurisprudence: certain rulings demonstrated European rights-oriented logic, whereas others followed Soviet-style formalism (Mälksoo, 2018). The gradual rate of generational transition hindered the complete adoption of European standards, especially regarding judicial independence, administrative law, and human rights adjudication (European Commission, 2021).

Public views of the courts were also influenced by Soviet legal traditions. Years of politically motivated trials and inadequate procedural protections fostered significant distrust in judicial institutions (Norkus, 2012). Following independence, this distrust continued, influencing both societal expectations and institutional conduct. Judges, conscious of delicate public trust, frequently favored rigid textualism and conservative readings to prevent claims of bias or politicization (OSCE, 2001). Consequently, views on judicial authority from the Soviet era indirectly aided the persistence of formalistic decision-making trends.

Ultimately, structural legacies—outmoded court facilities, inadequate funding for legal education, and the lack of established frameworks for professional ethics—bolstered continuity in legal culture throughout the 1990s. While these material limitations were slowly mitigated through European aid initiatives, they significantly impacted the early phase of judicial change and affected the interpretation and implementation of reforms (European Commission, 2004).

In conclusion, the historical continuity of legal culture in the Baltic states demonstrates the enduring presence of Soviet-era legal mindsets, professional behaviors, institutional customs, and societal views. Identifying and examining these continuities is crucial for comprehending both the successes and the ongoing challenges of judicial reform and legal harmonization within the European context.

8.1.2. Vetting of Soviet-Era Judges

The vetting of judges from the Soviet era was fundamental to transitional justice in the Baltic States, reconciling the need for accountability with the preservation of institutional continuity. After regaining independence, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania received a judiciary filled with numerous judges whose expertise was strongly rooted in the Soviet system. These judges were selected in a system where careers were frequently linked to loyalty to ideological beliefs, rather than to judicial independence or neutrality (Pettai & Pettai, 2015). Instead of implementing extensive purges that could jeopardize emerging judicial institutions, the Baltic states chose targeted vetting processes to examine the personal and professional backgrounds of current judges. These systems were created to evaluate if judges had participated in politically driven rulings, infringements on basic rights, or misuse of power during the Soviet era.

In practical terms, the vetting agencies in every Baltic nation were assigned responsibilities to assess professional integrity, ethical behavior, and political connections. In Lithuania, a dedicated commission managed the oversight by examining archival materials, judicial decisions, and disciplinary records, whereas in Latvia, the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) was involved in the vetting process by providing intelligence and legal knowledge (KNAB Report, 1997). Estonia created a comparable commission, backed by the Ministry of Justice, that interviewed judges, assessed their performance, and provided suggestions for either retention or dismissal (Mälksoo, 2018). The assessment criteria differed but usually comprised: recorded proof of ideological bias, involvement in political prosecutions, abuse of procedural powers, and neglect of due process rights. Judges deemed unsuitable were either removed or reassigned; nonetheless, many were permitted to stay in their positions with ongoing oversight, thus maintaining some degree of institutional continuity.

The vetting process also carried significant symbolic and normative implications: it represented a departure from the Soviet past while reinforcing judicial accountability in the newly established constitutional frameworks. Public discussion regarding vetting clarified a concept of an autonomous judiciary grounded in democratic legitimacy and responsibility (Pettai & Pettai, 2015). Certainly, parliamentary hearings and public reports regarding vetting decisions played a role in fostering public confidence in the rule of law. The procedure faced controversy; opponents contended that vetting commissions might be politicized, vulnerable to control by powerful political entities, or exploited to resolve political grievances (OSCE, 1999). To address this risk, the vetting commissions were designed to incorporate legal experts, former judges, and civil society members, thus enhancing their legitimacy and protecting the process from political interference.

After the vetting process, enduring reforms were necessary to incorporate vetted judges into an updated judicial system. Judges who underwent evaluation received assistance through retraining programs that focused on judicial ethics, procedural standards, and European legal principles. Simultaneously, judicial councils and selection entities were reorganized to implement merit-based recruitment systems, guaranteeing that upcoming judges would be assessed mainly on their competence, integrity, and independence instead of political affiliations (Pettai & Pettai, 2015). Some Baltic states provided compensation or early retirement for judges who did not pass vetting, attempting to balance retributive justice with practical issues related to capacity and stability (Mälksoo, 2018). As time progressed, the vetting legacy influenced not only personnel but also the institutional culture: systems of accountability were integrated into judicial appointments, discipline, and evaluation, which aided in strengthening judicial independence in the Baltic area.

8.1.3. Education and Retraining of Legal Professionals

The retraining and re-education of legal professionals in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania following the Soviet Union's collapse represented a key transformative element of judicial reform. Throughout the Soviet era, legal education was based on Marxist–Leninist principles, highlighting the Party's dominance, the priority of state interests, and the role of courts as administrative tools rather than as independent judicial entities (Dzierwa, 2013; Schwartz, 2000). Consequently, the newly independent Baltic nations acquired bar associations, prosecutorial offices, and law faculties that were unfamiliar with adversarial processes, constitutional review, or the standards of the rule of law found in Western European systems. The challenge, consequently, involved not just revising curricula but also shifting an entire profession from ideological jurisprudence to democratic legality, institutional neutrality, and European legal standards (Mälksoo, 2015).

A primary and urgent focus in legal education has been the revision of law curricula at universities. The faculties of the University of Tartu, the University of Latvia, and Vilnius University implemented extensive shifts from Soviet civil codes to Western-style private, constitutional, and administrative law, significantly influenced by comparative frameworks from Germany, the Nordic countries, and the wider European Union (Balčytis, 2017). Human rights law, EU law, and public international law—subjects that were once sidelined or reinterpreted ideologically during the USSR—emerged as core components of education (Ginsburg & Simpser, 2014). Western legal academics were invited for short-term teaching roles, while substantial EU PHARE and TEMPUS funding aided student exchanges, textbook creation, and institutional accreditation (European Commission, 2001). These educational changes established the theoretical basis for developing a new cohort of legal professionals able to interpret legal documents beyond the Soviet positivist framework.

The second key element of reform consisted of retraining programs for current judges, prosecutors, and advocates. Numerous legal experts educated in Soviet institutions were

suddenly required to function in a completely altered legal landscape—one that necessitated judicial autonomy, adversarial processes, and alignment with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Fogelklou, 2002). To aid this transition, the Baltic countries created judicial training centers, including the Estonian Legal Information Centre (subsequently integrated into the Supreme Court's training duties), the Latvian Judicial Training Centre, and the Lithuanian National Courts Administration. These organizations provided compulsory classes on constitutional interpretation, the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), fair trial criteria, and current procedural standards (Venice Commission, 2012). Global collaborations with the Council of Europe, the Nordic Council, and several EU initiatives were vital in providing trainers, resources, and financial assistance (Council of Europe, 2010).

In addition to retraining initiatives for the judiciary, the Baltic states significantly invested in reforming legal education at universities, acknowledging that lasting change necessitated redefining the intellectual basis for future legal professionals. Law faculties in Tallinn, Tartu, Riga, Vilnius, and Kaunas experienced significant curriculum changes in the 1990s and early 2000s, progressively moving away from Soviet-style memorization to adopt seminar-based, comparative, and case law approaches aligned with continental European legal customs (Pūķis, 2010; Kraniauskas, 2015). The TEMPUS and PHARE academic cooperation programs, funded by the EU, facilitated exchanges with universities in Scandinavia and Central Europe, allowing Baltic students to study EU law, human rights, and public administration reform overseas before returning to update their home institutions (European Commission, 2002). These changes also enhanced accreditation criteria, established external quality-assurance organizations, and coordinated degree frameworks with the Bologna Process, guaranteeing conformity with European academic standards (Tamtik, 2013).

A persistent issue across the region has been the generational divide between younger lawyers educated in reforms and older practitioners whose training is rooted in late-Soviet legal traditions. While the former progressively adopt adversarial reasoning, constitutional oversight, and European human-rights case law, the latter might continue to uphold hierarchical, procedure-oriented, and formalistic methods (Ledeneva, 2006; Mälksoo, 2018). Consequently, Baltic authorities implemented mentorship programs and diverse professional teams to promote the sharing of innovative legal practices among different generations. Research demonstrates that differences in educational backgrounds have at times led to inconsistencies in judicial reasoning and varied alignment with EU and ECHR standards, especially in the areas of administrative, environmental, and anti-corruption law (Švedas, 2014). To address these deficiencies, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania broadened continuing-education requirements, mandating judges, prosecutors, and public defenders to enhance their qualifications through compulsory training hours in European case law, judicial ethics, and standards of good governance (CEPEJ, 2020).

The digital shift in legal education emerged as a major reform catalyst during the 2010s. E-learning platforms, online legal databases, and remote training modules—implemented partially due to EU digitalization goals—facilitated wider access to standardized

resources and international judicial training networks (European Commission, 2017). Estonia, frequently at the forefront of digital governance in the region, initiated virtual simulations for training in court procedures and created integrated platforms connecting law-faculty programs with judicial-training institutions (Kalvet, 2012). Latvia and Lithuania adopted hybrid-learning programs, but slower institutional modernization and budget limitations sometimes restricted the scope of implementation (OECD, 2019). Digitalization has enhanced access to EU case law, allowing Baltic legal professionals to utilize CJEU and ECHR precedents more consistently and bolstering their ability to engage in cross-European judicial discussions (Kovács & Fridvall, 2021).

Ultimately, collaboration with European and transatlantic allies has been key to the professional development of Baltic legal practitioners. Consistent involvement in training programs by the Council of Europe, workshops on human rights by the OSCE, and judicial exchanges within the Nordic-Baltic region promoted a culture of judicial independence and adherence to the rule of law (OSCE, 2004; Council of Europe, 2012). These partnerships also aided in specializing in delicate areas like anti-corruption lawsuits, cybercrime, prosecution of organized crime, and constitutional judgment. With time, these transnational networks fostered a uniquely European professional identity among Baltic jurists—rooted in pluralistic reasoning, transparent processes, and supranational legal interconnections. While remnants of Soviet legal culture persist, the combined impact of educational reform, retraining, and institutional modernization has resulted in a judiciary that is more equipped to support democratic governance and actively interact with the European legal framework (Mälksoo, 2020; Pettai & Pettai, 2015).

8.1.4. Constitutional Reforms After Independence

The constitutional changes implemented by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania following their independence in the early 1990s signify some of the most extensive attempts at state rebuilding in post-Soviet Europe. Every nation confronted the pressing challenge of dismantling the Soviet legal system while also creating democratic constitutional structures that could support the rule of law, safeguard human rights, and ensure the separation of powers. In contrast to numerous post-Soviet nations that mainly sought gradual change, the Baltic states employed a dual approach: reviving their pre-war constitutional practices and incorporating contemporary European constitutional ideals. Estonia restored the 1938 Constitution to serve as a legal basis before creating a new constitution in 1992; Latvia also revived the 1922 Satversme, emphasizing legal continuity with the interwar republic; whereas Lithuania implemented an entirely new constitution after a national referendum in 1992 (Mälksoo, 2005; Zaksauskienė, 2014). This method symbolically and legally disconnected from the Soviet constitutional framework, enabling Baltic lawmakers to stress that independence was not newly given, but reinstated under international law (Dawson & Hanley, 2016).

A key element of the initial constitutional changes included redefining the relationships between the executive and legislative branches and adjusting the power of the judiciary. Each of the three Baltic constitutions highlighted the importance of parliamentarism and

prioritized democratic representation. Similarly, those drafting the constitution aimed to avert an overreach of executive authority—perceived as a historical danger during both the Soviet era and the authoritarian interwar time. Consequently, mechanisms for parliamentary oversight, processes for impeachment, and restrictions on presidential power were meticulously outlined (Auers, 2015). Simultaneously, the creation of constitutional courts (in Latvia and Lithuania) and constitutional examination via the general judiciary (in Estonia) emerged as crucial factors in protecting rights. These entities were established to guarantee that national laws align with constitutional principles, human rights agreements, and, ultimately, European Union regulations (Švedas, 2014). The establishment of constitutional review has been broadly acknowledged as one of the most efficient protections against democratic regression in the area (Venice Commission, 2012).

A key focus of the constitutional reforms was the establishment of fundamental rights, an area where the Baltic states deliberately positioned themselves in line with European human rights standards. Utilizing the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the constitutions integrated comprehensive lists of civil and political rights, which encompassed safeguards for freedom of expression, religious freedom, minority rights, and procedural fairness. Lithuania's 1992 Constitution advanced by detailing social and economic rights, showcasing modern European constitutional trends (Kūris, 2013). The Baltic states strengthened these measures with later laws aligning criminal procedure, administrative justice, and anti-corruption legislation with the standards set by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). These reforms were not just aspirational; they became essential to the Baltic path toward EU membership, with the EU highlighting strong rights protection as a key element of the Copenhagen criteria for accession (European Commission, 1997).

Constitutional reform also necessitated a reassessment of the role of minorities and citizenship, a particularly delicate matter in Estonia and Latvia because of their substantial Russian-speaking communities. Both nations implemented citizenship regulations rooted in restorationism—automatically providing citizenship to former nationals and mandating that others pursue naturalization. Constitutional amendments, judicial rulings, and OSCE mediation progressively moved these frameworks toward more inclusive models throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Agarin, 2010). The constitutional courts of Latvia and Lithuania produced several significant decisions that set forth principles of equality, non-discrimination, and proportionality in minority rights legislation (Bubnovska, 2017). Despite the contentiousness of political debates, the overarching trend indicated a legal Europeanization, as constitutional norms progressively aligned with ECHR case law and EU directives on anti-discrimination (Kovács & Fridvall, 2021).

Simultaneously, public-administration reform was incorporated into constitutional design to dismantle the centralized, hierarchical Soviet governance structure. Constitutions in each of the three states created autonomous ombuds institutions, national audit offices, and civil-service structures focused on transparency, competitive hiring, and anti-

corruption measures (Transparency International, 2004; OECD, 2019). Estonia led the way in digital constitutional governance by implementing legally accepted e-signatures, online tools for parliamentary transparency, and accessible legal databases, initiatives that were subsequently adopted by Latvia and Lithuania (Kalvet, 2012). These systems enhanced vertical accountability and promoted a civic culture focused on engagement and supervision.

Ultimately, constitutional changes set the stage for supranational integration. All three Baltic nations revised their constitutions to allow the transfer of sovereign authority to international organizations—particularly the EU and NATO—while ensuring democratic oversight and adherence to constitutional principles (Mälksoo, 2018). This legal basis facilitated EU accession in 2004, guaranteeing the predominance of EU law in specified domains and creating automatic compliance systems via the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). Since accession, constitutional jurisprudence has progressively embodied the principles of proportionality, legitimate expectations, legal certainty, and fundamental rights as defined by the CJEU and the ECHR (Pettai & Pettai, 2015). These changes demonstrate that constitutional reform has not only democratized governance but also solidified the Baltic states' position within the European legal framework.

8.1.5. European Legal Integration Milestones

The integration of European law has been a crucial aspect of the Baltic states' evolution after gaining independence from the Soviet Union. A major milestone was joining the European Union on 1 May 2004, after the Treaty of Accession was signed in 2003. This moment represented not merely a political event but a constitutional milestone: the Baltic states joined a shared EU legal framework, bringing significant consequences for their internal legal systems. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) subsequently referred to the 2004 enlargement as a "constitutional moment," highlighting how the addition of the Baltic states increased the legal and normative variety within the EU while strengthening common values such as the supremacy of EU law. After joining, the Baltic states needed to harmonize a wide array of domestic laws with the EU acquis communautaire. This procedure involved significant changes to their administrative, civil, and commercial legal frameworks. Public procurement regulations, competition legislation, and regulatory structures needed significant modernization to align with EU standards and guarantee effective engagement in the Internal Market. Furthermore, judicial systems experienced changes: autonomous administrative entities and regulatory agencies were created, based on European frameworks, to uphold EU legal norms at the national level (Cheesman & Badó, 2023). Another significant achievement in integration pertains to the safeguarding of human rights. Being members of the Council of Europe, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were already bound by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), but their EU membership enhanced that obligation. National courts are progressively incorporating Strasbourg case law, integrating ECHR principles into their constitutional reasoning and procedural law.

Judicial governance also progressed notably due to European influence. The framework of judicial councils—autonomous entities responsible for the selection, assessment, and regulation of judges—gained increased prevalence. These entities are strongly endorsed by European institutions to protect judicial autonomy. In the Baltic states, reforms over time have aimed to create or enhance similar systems, minimizing executive influence in judicial selections and guaranteeing that judges are chosen based on merit and shielded from political pressures. Moreover, European integration has propelled more profound institutional changes via Council of Europe mechanisms. Reports from experts of the Council of Europe have consistently emphasized the significance of judicial self-governance, clear disciplinary processes, and the enhancement of judicial selection systems. The Baltic nations' readiness to implement these reforms signifies a sustained dedication to integrating European values into their legal frameworks, surpassing simple superficial adjustments. In Lithuania, the legal change has been especially significant. Recent comparative legal studies indicate that Lithuania's legal framework after joining the EU marks a significant departure from its Soviet past, establishing democratic constitutionalism, local self-governance, and rule-of-law as core principles. Additionally, the Lithuanian Constitutional Court has interpreted EU law in light of national constitutional provisions, aiding in the alignment of domestic constitutional identity with international obligations.

These milestones—EU membership, acceptance of the acquis, institutional reform, judicial governance, and human rights alignment—redefined not just the legal institutions of the Baltic states but also altered their legal culture. By consistently interacting with EU law and European institutions, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have reinforced their shift from post-Soviet legal frameworks to cohesive democracies that play an active role in influencing European legal standards.

8.2. Judicial Appointment and Tenure Systems

Judicial appointment and tenure mechanisms form the essential framework for judicial independence in the Baltic States, influencing how courts withstand outside influences and uphold fair decision-making. After gaining independence, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania implemented reforms guided by European norms—especially the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, GRECO suggestions, and EU rule-of-law oversight frameworks—which stress the importance of merit-based selection, job security, and protection from political influence (Venice Commission, 2010; European Commission, 2023). Although every state possesses unique constitutional traditions, their institutional paths align with common European standards emphasizing transparent selection processes, the professionalization of judicial councils, and measures that curtail executive overreach (Coman & Polga-Hecimovich, 2019). However, the Baltic

experience shows that building institutions is influenced by past events: the historical remnants of centralized Soviet appointment systems persist in shaping current discussions about judicial independence (Popova, 2012)

8.2.1. National Councils for the Judiciary

National judicial councils act as crucial intermediaries in the appointment, advancement, and disciplinary oversight of judges. The Judicial Council of Estonia (Kohtute Nõukoda), Latvia's Judiciary Council (Tieslietu padome), and Lithuania's Judicial Council (Teisėjų taryba) were created to meet European standards that mandate judicial institutions to manage the internal governance of the profession instead of political figures (European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice [CEPEJ], 2022). In reality, each council oversees the hiring of judges, offers advice on laws impacting the judiciary, and guarantees compliance with ethical standards.

In comparison, Lithuania's Judicial Council possesses the most extensive authority: it directly engages in the nomination of judges for presidential appointment and oversees training via the National Courts Administration (Venice Commission, 2014). Latvia's council plays a more advisory role; however, GRECO reports emphasize gradual advancements in its independence, particularly following reforms that diminish the Ministry of Justice's administrative control over the judiciary (GRECO, 2021). Estonia's council is recognized for its equitable mix of judges and legal professionals, earning high marks for transparency and engagement with stakeholders (European Commission, 2023). Despite ongoing challenges—especially in terms of resources and administrative independence—Baltic judicial councils are well aligned with European best practices.

8.2.2. Executive Influence on Appointments

The impact of executive power continues to be a crucial measure of judicial autonomy. In each of the three Baltic States, judges are officially appointed by the head of state—Estonia's President (based on a proposal from the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court), Latvia's Saeima (following a recommendation from the Minister of Justice), and Lithuania's President (upon the counsel of the Judicial Council). The Venice Commission states that presidential appointments are appropriate when they are part of a transparent, merit-based process overseen by judicial entities (Venice Commission, 2010). Lithuania is frequently mentioned as an effective example since presidential discretion is limited by obligatory Judicial Council suggestions, which diminishes chances for political bias (European Commission, 2023).

Latvia has historically encountered greater criticism: GRECO and OSCE reports indicate that the Ministry of Justice once held considerable influence over the advancement of judicial careers, leading to reforms that shifted essential responsibilities to the Council for the Judiciary (GRECO, 2021). Estonia is noted for its somewhat depoliticized system, although there are ongoing worries regarding the limited size of the judiciary and its vulnerability to informal political influences (CEPEJ, 2022). In general, executive participation exists but is moderated; European supervision guarantees that Baltic selection procedures continue to be primarily merit-based.

8.2.3. Security of Tenure and Judicial Ethics

Tenure protections form a key foundation for independence: all Baltic judges remain in office until mandatory retirement, except in instances of serious disciplinary breaches decided by judicial bodies rather than political entities (European Commission, 2023). This model is consistent with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which mandates security of tenure to guard against unjust removal and political retribution (ECHR, 2019). Judicial ethics systems enhance tenure safeguards by promoting a culture of fairness and professional accountability.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have each implemented extensive judicial ethics codes—frequently developed with assistance from the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary (ENCJ)—concerning conflicts of interest, impartiality, and confidentiality. Lithuania's framework is regarded as the most formalized, highlighting a Judicial Ethics and Discipline Commission that functions autonomously from the Ministry of Justice (ENCJ, 2022). Latvia and Estonia have enhanced transparency in discipline by consistently publishing decisions and utilizing public reporting systems (GRECO, 2021). Challenges persist, especially concerning public confidence and views on corruption, yet Baltic tenure safeguards largely align with European benchmarks.

8.2.4. Comperative Independence Indicies

Comparative metrics consistently position the Baltic States higher than the EU average regarding judicial independence. The World Justice Project (2023) states that Estonia is one of the top performers in the EU regarding limiting government power and having no corruption. Lithuania and Latvia have slightly lower scores yet still surpass numerous older EU countries, showcasing the effectiveness of post-Soviet institutional reforms. CEPEJ efficiency metrics indicate comparatively brief resolution periods in civil and commercial matters, reinforcing the operational aspect of independence (CEPEJ, 2022). Simultaneously, EU Rule of Law Reports underscore advancements in judicial councils, transparency in discipline, and administrative independence (European Commission, 2023).

Nevertheless, challenges are significant: Latvia encounters ongoing issues regarding political interference in lower courts, while Lithuania struggles with variations in public trust after corruption scandals in 2019 (OSJI, 2020). Estonia’s compact judiciary is effective but susceptible to being overwhelmed. Nonetheless, from a comparative viewpoint, the Baltic area is generally seen as one of the most effective post-communist judicial reform settings in Europe.

8.3. Public Trust and Corruption in the Judiciary

Public confidence and views on corruption are key factors influencing judicial legitimacy in democratic systems, while the Baltic States have dedicated thirty years to addressing the institutional obscurity and political interference stemming from Soviet legal frameworks. Despite Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania enacting significant reforms to strengthen judicial independence, public trust varies, influenced by media reports,

prominent corruption scandals, and the wider socio-political environment (European Commission, 2023). Studies continually show that confidence in courts is shaped not only by their actual performance—like efficiency and fairness—but also by wider public experiences with the government, including dealings with administrative bodies or political entities (World Justice Project, 2023). The Baltic States, as post-Soviet societies, persist in managing the strain between legal continuity and democratic renewal, rendering transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption measures vital elements of judicial governance (Popova, 2012).

Throughout the area, Estonia reliably holds the greatest public confidence in the judiciary, thanks to consistent reforms, effective case management, and few corruption scandals (CEPEJ, 2022). Lithuania and Latvia show more variation, especially after instances of judicial misbehavior—like the 2019 corruption probe in Lithuania that implicated numerous senior judges, undermining public confidence even with swift institutional actions (OSJI, 2020). Nonetheless, independent evaluations from GRECO, CEPEJ, and the European Commission recognize that the Baltic States typically surpass numerous other EU and post-communist nations in combating judicial corruption (GRECO, 2021). The main challenge, then, is not widespread corruption but ensuring procedural transparency and reinforcing accountability systems to boost public trust.

8.3.1. Transparency of Court Proceedings

The openness of judicial processes is a fundamental necessity of the rule of law, guaranteeing that justice is not only achieved but also perceived to be achieved. Each of the three Baltic States ensures transparency in court hearings, the dissemination of judgments, and public availability of procedural information, in accordance with Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 2019). Estonia is often recognized as a regional frontrunner because of its extensive e-Justice system, offering online access to court schedules, rulings, and updates on procedural statuses; CEPEJ notes Estonia as a benchmark for digital transparency in Europe (CEPEJ, 2022). Lithuania and Latvia have also developed their digital infrastructure, although reforms have progressed inconsistently, especially in the digitization of lower courts and the uniform publication of rulings (European Commission, 2023).

Transparency is further improved by required explanations of decisions and accessible disciplinary records in all three states. Research in academia shows that public access to court rulings greatly enhances trust by minimizing informational disparities and enabling civil society, journalists, and legal scholars to examine judicial reasoning (Kosař & Šipulová, 2021). Nonetheless, obstacles persist: in Latvia, GRECO has observed discrepancies in the quality and promptness of published rulings, especially in administrative courts (GRECO, 2021). Lithuania, in the meantime, has encountered discussions on reconciling transparency with data privacy, particularly in notable corruption cases. Nevertheless, transparency measures have significantly diminished chances for informal influence and have synchronized Baltic judicial practices with European standards.

8.3.2. Role of Investigate Journalism

Investigative journalism serves an essential oversight role in revealing wrongdoing, enhancing accountability, and influencing public views on the integrity of the judiciary. In the Baltic States, independent media has traditionally played a crucial role in advancing anti-corruption reforms, frequently revealing instances that led to official inquiries and alterations in legislation. The judicial corruption scandal in Lithuania in 2019, which included claims of bribery and influence peddling among numerous judges, was first highlighted by investigative journalists through collaborative reporting; later judicial and parliamentary investigations validated parts of the reporting, emphasizing the significance of media oversight (OSJI, 2020). Likewise, Latvia has experienced media-led inquiries into conflicts of interest involving judicial authorities, aiding in wider reforms suggested by GRECO (GRECO, 2021).

Estonia shows a steadier connection between the judiciary and the media, with less corruption but strong journalistic oversight of judicial selections and administrative actions. Studies show that clear communication methods employed by courts—such as press releases, sharing of rulings, and accessible digital platforms—lessen the chances of misinformation and enhance public comprehension of legal procedures (European Commission, 2023). Nonetheless, the function of investigative journalism faces hurdles: media consolidation, economic constraints, and political division can at times affect the standard of reporting, especially in Latvia. Still, throughout the Baltic region, investigative journalism serves as an essential democratic protection and an unofficial but impactful accountability tool.

8.3.3. Disciplinary Procedures

Robust disciplinary systems for judges are crucial for upholding integrity and safeguarding judicial independence against political interference. The three Baltic States possess judicial disciplinary bodies that adhere to European standards: Estonia's Disciplinary Chamber in the Supreme Court, Latvia's Disciplinary Court, and Lithuania's Commission on Judicial Ethics and Discipline. These organizations are tasked with examining ethical breaches, misconduct, and violations of judicial responsibilities, ensuring that decisions are rational and appropriate (ENCJ, 2022). The Venice Commission highlights that disciplinary accountability should be separated from political entities, a principle largely realized in the Baltics via judicial self-governance frameworks (Venice Commission, 2010).

Lithuania's framework draws notable focus in global coverage because of its involvement in tackling the 2019 corruption scandal; the disciplinary authority responded promptly, enforced suspensions, and collaborated with prosecutors—garnering favorable assessments from the European Commission (European Commission, 2023). Estonia’s judicial processes are considered very effective, but the limited size of the judiciary presents potential conflicts of interest; therefore, CEPEJ advises maintaining a focus on external supervision and clear publication of results (CEPEJ, 2022). Latvia has recently enhanced its framework by enabling increased participation of the Judiciary Council and refining procedural transparency, addressing GRECO recommendations (GRECO, 2021).

In general, Baltic disciplinary systems significantly enhance public confidence by showing that judicial misconduct is handled in a consistent and unbiased manner.

8.3.4. International Evaluations (GRECO, CEPEJ)

International oversight bodies, especially GRECO and CEPEJ, are essential in assessing and promoting judicial integrity in the Baltic States. GRECO's Fourth Evaluation Round evaluates corruption prevention related to judges, prosecutors, and parliamentarians, and its reports consistently praise Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania for robust legal frameworks while pointing out areas needing enhancement, including conflict-of-interest regulations, asset declarations, and transparency in appointments (GRECO, 2021). CEPEJ offers comparative information regarding efficiency, caseloads, digitalization, and resource distribution; its assessments rank Estonia as one of Europe's most effective judicial systems, while Lithuania and Latvia exceed the European median (CEPEJ, 2022).

These assessments impose normative pressure on national governments, strengthening adherence to European standards and offering benchmarks that steer reforms. Latvia's recent advancements in judicial transparency and disciplinary independence were directly shaped by GRECO suggestions, whereas Estonia's digital justice reforms closely mirror CEPEJ best practices. Lithuania's incorporation into EU and Council of Europe legal frameworks has likewise influenced its approach to corruption scandals, encouraging conformity with European standards for judicial accountability (European Commission, 2023). International assessments serve as vital external protections that enhance public confidence and bolster the autonomy, effectiveness, and integrity of Baltic judicial systems.

8.4. European Union Legal Harmonisation

Since their accession in 2004, the legal harmonisation of the European Union has significantly influenced the reformation of the judicial systems in the Baltic States. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the EU with unique post-Soviet legal backgrounds, but all three quickly conformed their judicial frameworks, administrative practices, and substantive law to the acquis communautaire. The harmonization process has been complex—featuring the adoption of EU directives and regulations, reforming national legal institutions to align with EU standards, and establishing mechanisms to ensure the supremacy and direct effect of EU law (Craig & de Búrca, 2021). Adhering to EU standards has served not only as a legal requirement but also as a political tool for strengthening judicial independence, reinforcing rule of law protections, and enhancing cooperation in cross-border procedures.

A key element of this process is the authoritative role of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), whose case law offers interpretative direction and maintains consistency among Member States. In the Baltic States, recognition of the primacy of EU law represented a significant shift from the hierarchical legal structures of the Soviet era. National constitutional courts—especially Lithuania's—were crucial in harmonizing EU commitments with national constitutional identity. The Constitutional Courts in Lithuania and Latvia have consistently recognized that EU membership involves a voluntary

constraint on national sovereignty, as long as the core of constitutional identity is safeguarded (Van Elsuwege, 2020). Estonia, with a constitution that already highlighted the continuity of the rule of law, incorporated EU law with relatively fewer doctrinal conflicts.

Harmonisation has been particularly impactful in sectors like data privacy (GDPR), competition regulations, consumer safety, asylum and migration legislation, and judicial collaboration in criminal issues (European Commission, 2023). The Baltic States have gained from structural EU instruments like the European Rule of Law Mechanism and the Cooperation and Verification Framework (CVF), which, while mainly directed at Bulgaria and Romania, indirectly influenced Baltic judicial reforms by establishing a normative standard. The yearly Rule of Law Report now serves as a unifying tool, assuring uniform oversight of judicial independence, anti-corruption systems, and media liberty.

Even with considerable alignment, obstacles remain. Implementation shortcomings in intricate areas—public procurement, anti-money laundering systems, and judicial digitization—underscore inequalities between the three nations. Latvia has received criticism for its slow adoption of EU whistleblower protection regulations, whereas Lithuania has had difficulties in consistently applying EU asylum processes (European Commission, 2023). Similarly, even with Estonia's forefront position in digital justice reforms, inconsistencies persist among lower courts concerning procedural uniformity. Consequently, harmonisation continues to be a dynamic process influenced by political determination, institutional capability, and the changing jurisprudence of the CJEU.

8.4.1. Implementation of ECJ Ruling

The execution of CJEU judgments is one of the key elements of EU legal harmonisation, guaranteeing consistent interpretation of EU law among Member States. For the Baltic States, compliance with CJEU case law represented not just a legal obligation but also a symbolic confirmation of their integration into European legal culture after years of Soviet seclusion. Since joining, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have demonstrated strong adherence to CJEU rulings, with infringement cases usually settled through legislative or administrative changes (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2022).

A notable early landmark case concerning the Baltics was Viking Gas (C-475/11), whereby the CJEU elucidated consumer rights regarding the sale of refillable gas cylinders—a ruling that directly influenced Latvian consumer-protection laws. Latvia quickly revised its Consumer Protection Law to align with the ruling, demonstrating the obligatory character of CJEU decisions and the rapid response of Baltic legislatures (European Commission, 2014). Likewise, Lithuania had to revise regulations regarding renewable-energy support mechanisms after the Alpiq judgment (C-573/12), illustrating the influence of CJEU case law on domestic energy markets.

Lithuania and Latvia have been involved in infringement cases concerning their incomplete implementation of the Reception Conditions Directive and the Asylum Procedures Directive in the field of migration and asylum law. CJEU decisions clarified

procedural protections, the entitlements of asylum seekers, and standards for detention, resulting in significant changes to administrative regulations (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022). Estonia, while not commonly engaged in litigation, has had to modify its domestic procedural regulations in light of CJEU rulings concerning VAT fraud, data privacy (especially after Schrems II), and public procurement.

A unique aspect of Baltic compliance is the proactive application of preliminary references pursuant to Article 267 TFEU. National courts frequently seek advice from the CJEU to obtain precise interpretations of EU law in intricate cases. Estonia is a regional frontrunner in this system, regularly presenting initial references concerning taxation, digital service regulation, and international criminal collaboration. Lithuania has been engaged as well, especially in litigation concerning consumer protection and financial services. This judicial conversation has enabled enhanced harmonisation and has allowed national judges to function as decentralised EU law adjudicators, marking a substantial normative change from the Soviet custom of hierarchical judicial oversight (Bobek, 2017).

Though there is generally a strong level of compliance, challenges remain. GRECO and the European Commission express worries regarding administrative holdups, inconsistent reasoning in lower courts, and inadequate sharing of CJEU case law among legal practitioners (European Commission, 2023). Ongoing education for judges—especially related to competition law, digital markets, and fundamental rights—continues to be crucial. Nevertheless, the Baltic States are notable among post-communist Member States for their unwavering compliance with CJEU decisions and their increasing input into European judicial discourse.

8.4.2. Cross-Border Legal Cooperation

Cross-border legal collaboration is a key aspect of EU legal alignment and has changed the judicial framework of the Baltic area. Tools like the European Arrest Warrant (EAW), the European Investigation Order (EIO), and the Brussels Regulations have established exceptional levels of judicial interdependence, facilitating quick mutual acknowledgment of judgments and improving the effectiveness of civil and criminal processes (EU Council, 2021). In the Baltic States—small, open economies characterized by considerable cross-border movement—the actual influence of these mechanisms has been notably significant.

The EAW can be considered the most impactful tool. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania rank among the quickest Member States in their surrender procedures, demonstrating both effective administration and robust political backing for the integration of European criminal justice (Eurojust, 2022). The Baltic States consistently issue and carry out EAWs for cases related to organised crime, cybercrime, and corruption—domains recognized as regional security priorities. Collaboration with Nordic countries is particularly vibrant, demonstrating historical and geopolitical connections.

Collaboration in civil and commercial sectors has also advanced considerably. The

implementation of the Brussels I Recast Regulation has improved the recognition and enforcement of civil judgments, minimizing procedural obstacles for Baltic firms functioning in the EU Single Market. Lithuania's specialized commercial courts and Estonia's sophisticated e-justice framework have facilitated smoother cross-border litigation, whereas Latvia has enhanced judicial training in line with CEPEJ recommendations (CEPEJ, 2022).

MLA mechanisms enhance collaboration in intricate criminal cases. Via Eurojust and Europol, the Baltic States engage in various Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) targeting trafficking, financial fraud, and cybercrime. Estonia’s proficiency in cybercrime, especially, positions it as a regular contributor to EU-wide initiatives, showcasing its extensive role in digital governance. Regional initiatives like the Baltic Assembly, Nordic-Baltic collaboration frameworks, and trilateral judicial meetings bolster cross-border cooperation.

However, there are still practical challenges. Variations in procedural law—especially concerning evidence admissibility, prosecutorial discretion, and pre-trial detention—can hinder cooperation. Latvia has encountered criticism for postponements in fulfilling EIO requests, whereas Lithuania has been encouraged by the European Commission to enhance collaboration between police and prosecutors in cross-border investigations (European Commission, 2023). In spite of these obstacles, EU legal harmonisation has significantly enhanced judicial collaboration in the Baltic area, strengthening the rule of law and aiding integration into the wider European legal framework.

8.5. Regional Legal Cooperation and Future Outlook

Historically, regional legal collaboration among the Baltic States has been an overlooked yet profoundly important factor in the evolution of justice. After gaining independence, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania reinstated not only national judicial systems but also trilateral cooperation mechanisms among their supreme courts. These initiatives have developed into organized collaboration platforms, featuring combined judicial staff meetings, collaborative legal training sessions, and ongoing dialogues among constitutional courts (Latvian Constitutional Court, 2024). As regional threats to the rule of law and security challenges develop, Baltic legal collaboration is progressively viewed as a way to strengthen democratic resilience, enhance judicial capacity, and harmonize practices among jurisdictions. At the same time, the digital transformation of courts presents fresh opportunities for collaboration that go beyond procedural and geographical limits, establishing the groundwork for a more cohesive and efficient Baltic legal environment.

8.5.1. Baltic Judicial Council Proposol

A future-oriented vision for Baltic legal collaboration includes creating a Baltic Judicial Council, a formal trilateral entity that could enable shared oversight, policy alignment, and strategic judicial improvements. This proposal relies on current, though unofficial, collaboration: for instance, the highest courts of the three nations conduct annual meetings, and in 2025, advisors, assistant judges, and consultants from the Baltic

supreme courts gathered in Vilnius to share best practices and address court digitalisation. Additionally, the constitutional courts of the three States have conducted tripartite meetings to address procedural guarantees and EU law integration, emphasizing both practical and symbolic solidarity.

A formal Baltic Judicial Council could utilize these existing frameworks to establish cooperation in aspects such as judicial education, digital skills development, common judicial ethics benchmarks, and coordination of cross-border case law. It would also create a platform to enhance cooperation on constitutional matters, harmonizing national constitutional law with regional developments and external European commitments. Through the integration of strategic foresight and administrative skills, this council may facilitate uniform legal interpretations, pool judicial resources, and organize unified responses to external challenges, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and efficacy of Baltic judiciaries.

Nonetheless, establishing such an entity would come with difficulties. Issues of legal sovereignty, constitutional identity of the nation, and distribution of resources need to be handled with care. The judicial system of each country possesses its unique institutional history, political circumstances, and administrative framework, potentially hindering attempts to create a truly collective entity with decision-making authority. Additionally, guaranteeing that the Council has tangible influence would necessitate not just official mandates but also ongoing funding, confidence among judicial leaders, and support from political figures. In spite of these challenges, the drive from current collaboration and the growing need for regional coordination in a chaotic geopolitical environment render this proposal urgent and persuasive.

8.5.2. Shared Training Initiatives

A leading instance of Baltic collaboration in enhancing judicial capacity is the ERA Baltic Network of EU Law Experts project, which facilitates transnational, cross-professional training for judges and prosecutors across the three Baltic States. Within this program, legal experts convene in seminars, webinars, and study visits to enhance their comprehension of EU law, preliminary reference processes, and international judicial matters. The program specifically aims to improve the digital competencies of judges and prosecutors, enabling them to address intricate EU legal matters within a progressively online legal landscape.

Furthermore, national judicial systems are increasingly incorporating regional training into their institutional programs. For instance, Estonia's Supreme Court has a training initiative featuring a digital learning portal built on Moodle, offering newly appointed judges essential introductory courses and resources to manage judicial IT systems. This platform enhances long-term capabilities, allowing judges to improve their digital skills, utilize virtual case-management tools efficiently, and work together with colleagues throughout the Baltic region. Collaborative training improves both legal expertise and the

mutual trust and common professional standards within the judiciary.

In the future, collaborative training programs may broaden to incorporate joint legal academies, inter-jurisdictional clerk exchanges, and synchronized judicial mentorships. A comprehensive Baltic training framework might also leverage EU funding (e.g., through the EU Justice Programme) to support sustained partnerships. Investing in joint professional development, the Baltic states would create a collective reservoir of legal knowledge, minimize redundancy, and cultivate a regional judicial identity prepared for the multifaceted challenges of European integration, digital justice, and resilience in the rule of law.

8.5.3. Digitalisation of the Judiciary

Digitalization is a major factor in contemporary judicial reform, with the Baltic States leading the way in judicial digital advancements. At a 2025 gathering of judicial assistants and advisers from the Supreme Courts, courts in Estonia and Lithuania exchanged insights regarding the use of AI technologies and digital platforms. Lithuania presented its AI tool TeDIA, which generates anonymized press releases derived from case rulings, while Estonian representatives exhibited electronic case-management systems that facilitate case submissions and document processing. These exchanges are both symbolic and practical: they allow Baltic judiciaries to collaboratively develop digital legal infrastructure.

The process of institutionalizing digital collaboration is currently in progress. The Lithuanian Judicial Council states that collaboration through European judicial networks such as the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN) and ENCJ supports its judiciary in adopting best practices in e-justice, cross-border e-litigation, and judicial performance assessment. Furthermore, CEPEJ data reveals that Baltic courts engage in performance reporting initiatives to standardize digital caseflow analysis and workload measurements.

In the future, a Baltic digital justice roadmap could formalize collaboration on AI resources, unified judicial data systems, and standardized e-court protocols. This roadmap could encompass the creation of a trilateral Baltic e-court platform, collaborative AI ethical standards for judicial rulings, and transnational access to digital legal databases. This would enhance efficiency and contribute to creating a common judicial system in accordance with European standards. Confronted with geopolitical instability and rising calls for resilient, transparent, and responsive justice systems, digitalisation provides the Baltic judiciaries a viable route towards enhanced regional integration and reinforced rule-of-law.

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