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Matonyte, Irmina; Šumskas, Gintaras; Morkevičius, Vaidas

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Europeanness of Lithuanian Political Elite: Europhilia, Russophobia and Neoliberalism

*Irmina Matonyte, Gintaras Šumskas & Vaidas Morkevičius**

Abstract: »Europäizität der litauischen politischen Elite. Europhilie, Russophobie und Neoliberalismus«. The article describes and analyzes the evolution of Lithuanian political elite's attitudes towards the European Union (EU) and its governance during the past decade (2004–2016). First, it reviews changes in the composition of Lithuania's political elite and assesses EU related policy decisions, which reveal the complex interrelations between national and supranational politics in a small but illustrative post-communist state. Second, it presents an analysis of the Lithuanian political elite's attitudes, which were surveyed in 2007, 2009 and 2014; it examines trends in the elite's attachment to Europe, their perceptions of threats to EU cohesion, changes in the levels of their trust in EU institutions, their conceptions of European governance, and their stances towards the management of financial and economic crisis. Comparing the three surveys captures evolution of the attitudes of the by and large consensually pro-European Lithuanian political elite. The Europeanness of the Lithuanian political elite also increases, an attitude which appears to be more a response to Russia-induced geopolitical destabilization than to the 2008 financial crisis.

Keywords: Lithuania, European Union, Russia, financial crisis of 2008, affective attachment, threat, governance, political parties and ideologies.

1. Introduction¹

The expanding field of European studies generally treats small post-communist states such as Lithuania and the other Baltic states only marginally, and empirical research studies are rare. Lithuania's size and relatively recent date of joining the EU (it became a full-fledged EU member-state in 2004) partially explain this neglect. We argue, however, that it is precisely these two features, the small size of the state and the newness of its EU membership, that are the main determinates of the *Europeanness* (Best, Lengyel, and Verzichelli, 2012) of the

* Irmina Matonyte, K. Semenavicius 2-2, Vilnius, LT-10251, Lithuania; irmmat@ism.lt.
Gintaras Šumskas, Mileiškių sodu 48, LT-10251, Vilnius, Lithuania; ginsum@ism.lt.
Vaidas Morkevičius, Palemono 74, Kaunas, LT-52154, Lithuania; vaidas.morkevicius@ktu.lt.

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post-communist Lithuanian political elites; whose identities and interests reflect national, supra-national and international agendas, developing on the eastern border of the EU.

In this paper we describe and analyze the evolution of the attitudes of Lithuanian political elites towards the EU and its governance during the past decade. We start in 2004, when Lithuania joined the EU, and track their attitudes through to 2015, when Lithuania implemented two landmark decisions, namely, introducing the euro, and diversifying its supply of energy resources, thereby reducing its dependency on natural gas imports from Russia. In particular, our attention is focused on revealing the continuous consensual pro-Europeanness of national political elites and, despite the dramatic downturn of the economy after the global financial crisis in 2008², the paradoxical strengthening of the neo-liberalism, nationalism and Europhilia amongst Lithuania's political class. We argue that this somewhat counterintuitive development is best explained by the preoccupying concern of Lithuania's elites to safeguard their young and small post-communist nation-state against internal and external threats. The internal threat Lithuanian elites are most likely to fear is opportunistic populism. Externally, elites are very wary of Russia's increasing authoritarianism and imperialism, and are also concerned about a number of ongoing economic, social and political developments in the EU.

In the first section, we briefly review the national political discourse and certain policy decisions as they pertain to the Europeanization of Lithuania. We emphasize that its pro-European trajectory was invariably supported by an ideologically diverse series of coalition governments in Lithuania during the period of 2004-2015. We also provide a detailed account of the structural changes in the composition of the parliamentary elite in Lithuania; after becoming a fully-fledged member-state of the EU in 2004, Lithuania has experienced three regular national parliamentary elections (in 2004, 2008, and 2012)³. We end the section by briefly introducing the notion of *Europeanness* and formulate a number of research questions.

The second, major part of the article presents an analysis of the attitudes of Lithuania's political elite, drawn from representative survey data collected from interviews with Lithuanian MPs in 2007, 2009 and 2014. We examine trends of the Lithuanian political elite's attachment to Europe, their perceptions of threats to the EU, the levels of their trust in EU institutions, their concep-

² It would be reasonable to assume – albeit mistakenly in Lithuania's case, as we will later show – that after the financial crisis of 2008, favorable attitudes towards neo-liberalism would decrease. Steen (2015), for instance, hypothesized that because of the severe international shock, skepticism towards neo-liberal ideas should increase not only in the political and administrative sectors but also among business leaders (2015: 185).

³ The regular Seimas elections have been held in October 2016. The electoral campaign has not displayed any major changes in the core of neo-liberal, pro-European and Russophobe stances of the political class in Lithuania.

tions of European governance, and finally, their stances towards the EU's management of the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath.

Comparing three sets of surveys (each of them conducted with MPs elected in three different regular national elections), we try to capture the EU-related attitudinal shifts of the by and large consensually pro-European Lithuanian political elite. We then measure the scope of changes in the *Europeanness* of Lithuanian political elites, which reflects EU-level developments, is affected by the protracted financial-economic crisis, and is altered by Russian-led regional geopolitical destabilization.

In the final section we summarize the most compelling explanations that account for Lithuania's political elite's rising *Europeanness* over the past decade. We observe a remarkably resilient pro-European neoliberal mindset amongst Lithuania's elite; it is expressed most plainly in political elites' neglect of social security, their propensity to support economic retrenchment and fiscal thrift, their identification of Russia as an existential threat, and their strong emotional attachment to Europe.

2. Lithuania in the EU: European in Form, National in Substance?

The Europeanisation of Lithuania (i.e., its functional integration into the EU, the Europeanization of its public policies, etc.) has inspired and rallied the Lithuanian political elite and population since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The understanding of the EU's founders that solitary nation-states would struggle to face global challenges if they relied exclusively on their own national resources is an idea that resonates strongly in post-communist Lithuania. The normative and affective willingness to be a part of Europe after their freedom from the Soviet regime is prevalent among Lithuanian elites and is reinforced by strategic calculations: they view EU membership as a safe harbor, sheltering them from major geo-political and financial-economic turbulence, which they are particularly vulnerable to given the small size of their nation and its proximity to Russia.

2.1 General Overview of the Lithuanian Political Elites' Views Towards the EU

Lithuania became a member of the EU in May 2004, and both its population and its elites are largely enthusiastic and optimistic about the EU. In September 2015, the Eurobarometer poll showed that for 55% of Lithuanians the EU conjures up a positive image, compared to the EU average of 41% (Eurobarometer, 83).

In the mid-1990s, when Lithuania's prospect of joining the EU was gaining momentum, its political elites strongly supported integration. Lithuania's Asso-

ciation Treaty with the EU was signed in 1995. All mainstream Lithuanian political parties agreed that the country needed to Europeanize, i.e., liberalize markets, promote democratic practices, respect human rights, and of special significance, to re-build its Western identity (Baldwin 1995) while distancing itself from its former dependency on Russia (Elsuwege 2008). Except for the law on land ownership by foreigners⁴, there were no major controversies on the harmonization of national law and the adoption of *acquis communautaire*. The crucial issue for the Lithuanian elite was to join the EU as smoothly and as quickly as possible.

During the period of Lithuania's accession to the EU, the major difference among the essentially Europhile Lithuanian political parties rested in their perception of the speed and depth of reforms: the center-right parties favored radical and deep reforms, while the left and center-left wing parties advocated a slower pace (Jurkynas 2004). Eurosceptic attitudes were expressed by nationalist parties, but their paltry numbers (only two or three parliamentary members) illustrates just how marginal Euroscepticism was at the time.

In the first years of EU membership, Lithuania reconfirmed its Europhilia on numerous occasions. The Lithuanian *Seimas* ratified the ill-fated EU Constitution as early as November 11, 2004. When the EU Constitution failed and its abridged version, the Lisbon Treaty, was presented, Lithuanian parliamentarians endorsed it without much hesitation on the eve of the Day of Europe, 8 May 2008. A special decision-making procedure that Lithuania widely uses in the process of adoption (transposition) of EU rules and directives accelerates parliamentary deliberations, omits the phase of extended debates in the standing committees, and in effect is a means to "economize" lengthy discussions and hasten adoption (Matonyte 2015a).

Since the restoration of its post-communist statehood, the Lithuanian political class has been eagerly integrating itself into the EU as a supra-national polity. The *crème de la crème* of its national political elite is driven by ambitions for EU level careers (Matonytė and Šumskas 2014, Matonytė 2015b). In the European Parliament elections of 2004, 2009 and, albeit to a lesser degree, 2014, all major Lithuanian parties adopted positive attitudes towards European integration, endorsed the visa-free Schengen area, and the single currency euro. Only minor parties expressed worries about the loss of sovereignty, cultural identity, and criticized the cumbersome European bureaucracy. Overall, from 2004-2009 the Lithuanian political elite's support for a strong and unified Europe was virtually universal. During the EP elections in 2014, when as a consequence of the protracted economic crisis most of the EU member-states were struggling with growing discontent and rampant Euroscepticism (Viola

⁴ Lithuania had negotiated a 7 year transitional period to make Constitutional amendments necessary for land-ownership law harmonization. In 2011 the Seimas voted for the extension of limitations on the Lithuanian land ownership by foreigners until 2014.

2015), the Lithuanian political elite did express more criticism towards the EU than was usual for it. However, its majority remained largely positive and only slim divides separated the pro-European Social-Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals. The elections produced only 2 Eurosceptic MEPs in the 11-seat strong Lithuanian delegation in the EP 2014.

In terms of strategic national policies, during the first years of EU (and NATO) membership, the Lithuanian political elite made a number of vital decisions, revealing the character of its *Europeanness*. First, it decided to join the euro-zone in 2007 (although this first attempt failed due to its level of inflation, marginally bypassing the norms set by the EC). Second, inspired by the Common Security and Defense Policy and by the German example, in 2008 Lithuania decided to abolish the national conscript army (it should be noted that the crisis in Ukraine prompted Lithuania to reintroduce conscription in 2015). These and other patently pro-European decisions were largely supported by the leading political authorities and acclaimed across the political spectrum.

In addition, all post-communist Lithuanian presidents have been unequivocally pro-European, and depending on their personalities, political sensibilities and competences, they have been consistently engaged in the widening and deepening of EU integration. There is a famous axiom in Lithuania that the semi-presidential regime engenders tensions between president and parliament. However, the European agenda in Lithuania does not provoke any grave strains between the two institutions: on the contrary, the Lithuanian President and *Seimas* are in something of a contest to display just how exemplary their respective pro-European *bona fides* are. EU issues unite these two otherwise conflict-prone political institutions and foster common ground for the pluralist parliamentary elites.

2.2 Composition of the Parliamentary Elites in 2004, 2008 and 2014, and a Note on Lithuania's National Economic Austerity Policies post-2008

Since 1992 the unicameral Lithuanian *Seimas* is elected in regular parliamentary elections every four years. The post-communist multi-party system was defined by the divide between Social-Democrats (LSDP) and Conservatives (TS-LKD). Some national political elites were also drawn from the ranks of populist, liberal, peasant and green parties. The parliamentary elections in 2000, however, significantly changed this bi-polar equilibrium of Social-Democrats and Conservatives when two new important players, Social-Liberal and Liberal parties (NS-SL and LiCS), emerged on the political scene. Both parties embraced pro-European policies (primarily aiming to liberalize markets and ensure that Lithuania complied with the principle of the free movement of persons in Europe), with no less enthusiasm than the entrenched Social-Democrats and Conservatives.

Table 1: Political Parties in Lithuanian *Seimas* 2004–2016

	Political Ideology	Seats in			Party groups in the Dataset (2007–2014)	No. of cases in the Dataset
		2004–08	2008–12	2012–16		
Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP)	Social-democrat	31c	25	39c	Social Democrats	53
Liberal-Centre Union** (LiCS)	Liberal (Center)	18	8c	-	Liberals	44
Liberal Movement of the Lithuanian Republic*** (LRLS)	Liberal (right wing)	-	11c	10	Liberals	
New Union/ Social-Liberals (NS-LS)	Liberal (left-wing)	-	1	-	Liberals	
Homeland Union/ Lithuanian Christian democrats* (TS-LKD)	Conservative/ Christian democrat	25	45c	33	Conservatives	47
Order and Justice (Liberal Democratic Party) (TTP)	Populist, conservative, nationalist	11	15	11c	Other	52
Labor Party (DP)	Populist, social-liberal	39c	10	29c	Other	
Lithuanian Peasant People Union**** (LVLS)	Agrarian	10c	3	1	Other	
National Resurrection Party (TPP)	Populist, pro-market, nationalist	-	16c	-	Other	
Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (LLRA)	Ethnic minority (regional)	2	3	8c	Other	
Other / Non-aligned		5	4	10		
Total:		141	141	141		

Source: Lithuanian Central Electoral Commission: <<http://www.vrk.lt/>> accessed 18 October 2015.

**Sąjūdis* before 1993; during 1993–2008 Homeland Union–Lithuanian Conservatives.

** Before 2003 Lithuanian Union of the Center.

*** Until 2003, Lithuanian Liberal Union and, during 2003–2006, Party of the Liberal Union and the Center.

**** Until 2004 Peasant Party.

***** Symbol C next to number of seats in the Parliament indicates participation in ruling coalition.

The parliamentary elections in October 2004, which were the first elections held after Lithuania's entry into the EU, brought in the Labor Party (DP), a

newly created populist party, which was the first major political actor to voice criticism of the EU and to sympathize with the increasingly illiberal Russian political regime. Yet its leader, Viktor Uspaskich, did not keep up his populist rhetoric for long once elected, eagerly taking up a position as minister of the economy and upon which he became responsible for managing EU structural funds⁵. The parliamentary elections of 2008 and 2012 furthered the structural development of the Lithuanian party-system; Social-Democrats and Conservatives saw their support decline, while support for populists and liberals expanded. Notwithstanding, the Lithuanian political elite's pro-European stances remained firm, or even intensified, as evidenced by, for instance, elites' staunch support and advocacy to introduce the euro⁶.

As previously observed by Steen (2015, 200), despite the ongoing Europeanization and internationalization of its politics and economy, recent national independence is part of the national consciousness even among the most liberal segments of the Lithuanian elite (as well as their counterparts from two other small and new post-communist Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia), which explains their quite surprising propensity for nationalist orientations. In the early XXI century the Baltic elites predominantly employed the nation-state (with its adjacent connotations of national pride and esteem) as the most important frame of reference, instead of regarding it as a toolkit providing a range of instruments which might be used in different combinations to solve social and economic problems. According to Steen (2015, 200-201) the phenomenon of nationalist neo-liberalism explains why the Baltic elites are sympathetic to national independence and skeptical of international finance. This nationalist-neoliberal mindset of Lithuanian elites is displayed in the national economic austerity program, designed by the Conservative-Liberal coalition government in early 2009, the major parts of which were continued and further implemented by a new government formed after the 2012 *Seimas* elections in which Social-Democrats now held dominant ministerial positions. In late 2008 the Lithuanian government promptly and stoically adopted a national economic austerity program as an honorable and efficient solution to the severe economic downturn. This decision was strongly backed by President Grybauskaitė, who was outspokenly against any conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the EU. Appeals to national pride and self-sufficiency underpinned a propensity to deal with the economic crisis 'by ourselves' in order to preserve the sovereign socio-economic decision-making power of a small state; a common view of the Lithuanian political elite. The heated political debates in Lithuania abounded with emulative references to Estonia – which used its previously accumulated national budget surplus to cushion the fall

⁵ Meanwhile, the delegation of 5 MEPs from the populist DP elected to the EP in 2004 joined the ranks of the pro-European ALDE group.

⁶ The euro in Lithuania was introduced in January 2015.

caused by the financial shock of 2008, alongside sneering remarks about Latvia's humbling request to the IMF for financial assistance.

The national economic austerity package included drastic measures aimed at reducing the budget deficit. In late 2008, VAT was increased from 18% to 19% and later to 21%. Almost all exemptions from VAT were abolished; social insurance taxes for professionals, farmers and other groups were introduced and excise taxes for alcohol, tobacco and fuels were raised. Soon after, the government reduced budget expenditures; in 2009 it cut public sector wages and reduced pensions and other social allowances and benefits.

2.3 The *Europeanness* of National Political Elite

Higley and Burton (1989) claim that we can meaningfully talk of a *consensually unified elite*: its members largely share a tacit consensus about the rules of political conduct that restrains partisanship, and participate in an integrated structure of interaction that ensures reliable and effective access to each other and to the core of decision-making. The concept of a *consensually unified elite*, which is by and large applied at the nation-state level by researchers, can also be fruitfully extended to refer to a national political elite which coalesces around EU norms, institutions and planned future directions.

Noteworthy, the consensually unified elite is not a uniform elite. On one hand, partisan identities and different interests dynamically revise the existing intra-elite agreements, which otherwise would lead to the comprehensive consolidation of the elite's inner circles and allow to abuse and dump the conflicting views. On the other hand, the EU opens additional windows of opportunities for national elites to compete and forces them to reassess the initial ideas and convictions.

Therefore, both the national and supranational contexts impact a national political elite's views and actions, especially in the domain of European governance where national political elites are engaged in multiple roles. The representatives of a national elite, competing at home, might display congenial attitudes, become allies and support each other in their EU political careers. Conversely, because of the ever-increasing scope of decisions taken at the EU-level, the EU has become a powerful conflict-generating agent, spinning new lines of discord inside the national political elite. On the one hand, European research shows that in the EU and its member-states during the last decade, and especially within the context of financial crisis 2008, the European project has become a salient and divisive issue among the elites of member-states (Best and Higley 2014, Viola 2015). On the other hand, more focused research demonstrates that international shocks in small EU member-states are particularly conducive to national elite cohesion. For instance, interviews conducted in 2012/2013 with Latvian and Lithuanian elites show that the financial crisis of 2008 generated more united opinions, more skepticism towards international markets, and stronger support for national self-determination, while the elites'

pro-deregulation attitudes in the internal state-market relations remained practically intact (Steen 2015, 185)⁷.

In order to track the shifts and changes in national elites' attitudes towards the EU, the concept of *Europeanness* is particularly helpful. Developed by Best, Lengyel and Verzichelli (2012), the term comprises the idea that there coexist different dimensions of attitudes (emotions, cognitions, evaluations and expectations) and objects (institutions, policies, strategies) related to the EU and that they might be appreciated in robustly differentiated modes. One can analytically distinguish affective, cognitive-evaluative and projective dimensions of *Europeanness*, as it is expressed by national political elites in their retrospective and prospective individual-level stances towards various aspects of the EU. The emotional aspect of *Europeanness* captures personal attachment (positive or negative) to Europe. The cognitive-evaluative dimension of *Europeanness* reflects trends in the elite's concerns relative to EU matters (approval or disapproval of the current trends).

Turning to Lithuania, several insights related to their *Europeanness* can be drawn from the aggregate level data on EU-related political debates and decisions taking place in the country over the past decade (see sub-chapter 1.1.). First, the elite's emotional attachment to Europe does not weaken. The enthusiasm of Lithuania's EU accession negotiators was largely sustained and promoted by Lithuanian politicians' loyal and dutiful promotion of the European agenda both domestically and internationally. Yet, the question arises if the signs of disenchantment could not be found in the individual level data?

Secondly, regarding the cognitive-evaluative dimension of *Europeanness*, the aggregate level data indicate that Lithuanian elites are very positive and unanimous in their trust and support for EU institutions and policies. However, it also reveals that several adjustments of attitudes are taking place. Overall, Lithuanian politicians are pro-European and enthusiastically support joint European initiatives (promoting the eastern enlargement of the EU, advocating the Common Foreign and Security Policy, etc.). And yet, when forced to deal with troublesome issues, the Lithuanian political elite often rely on and revert to national-level solutions (the national economic austerity program of 2009, the re-introduction of a compulsory national conscript army in 2015, and the nationally financed liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal, symbolically called *Independence*, in Klaipėda port in 2014). Do these incidents reflect shifting attitudes amongst Lithuania's political elite? Are there signs of a more general reappraisal of EU institutions, policies and strategies, and if yes, which factors are shaping it?

Lastly, turning to the projective dimension of *Europeanness*, the aggregate level data show that Euro-enthusiasm prevails amongst the Lithuanian political class. Lithuania, as one would expect from a small, new EU member-state, is

⁷ However, Steen (2015) does not address the question of the stability of elites' attitudes towards the EU and its future governance.

supportive of pooled sovereignty in international affairs. However, this support perceptibly drops on key financial-economic issues (most notably on the coordination and integration of European economic initiatives) and it is even less supportive of some joint European policies in the social, cultural and civic spheres (such as Lithuania's reluctance to accept the pan-European asylum quota policy implementation since 2014).

We ask, then, how Lithuania's "gradual" Euro-enthusiasm has evolved and how smoothly it has been distributed and shared by different groups of the political elite. How entrenched among Lithuanian political elites is its support of neoliberalism, and how concerned are they with ensuring a safe neighborhood and independence from Russia? How has its lengthening experience of EU membership refashioned the *Europeanness* of the Lithuanian political elite? And critically, what influence, if any, has the 2008 financial crisis had on the *Europeanness* of the Lithuanian political class?

3. Changes in the Attitudes of Lithuanian Political Elites, 2004-2014

Our Lithuanian elite's survey data will be analyzed along the three above described dimensions of *Europeanness*. First, the emotional aspect of *Europeanness* is measured as the strength of one's attachment to Europe (or the EU). Second, the cognitive-evaluative dimension of *Europeanness* is evaluated by the level of one's trust in EU institutions, one's attitude towards the statement "Unification has gone too far or should be strengthened", one's willingness to transfer authoritative decisions to the supranational (EU) level, one's assessment of the efficacy and fairness of EU decision-making, and other criteria. The projective dimension of *Europeanness* measures the extent to which one expects positive developments to occur in the EU (in 10 years), and is indicated by one's outlook on the EU's political, economic, social, and geopolitical future, what one anticipates the trajectory of supranational governance and common European policies to be, and others indicators.

3.1 Boosting European Identity

The 2007 survey indicated that only 16% of Lithuanian political elites felt a strong attachment towards the EU, while the 2014 survey reveals a significant increase (up to 50%) in elites' affective *Europeanness*. Elites' emotional attachment to Europe grew in parallel with their emotional attachment to local communities (regions), while the national identity in all three surveys was very strong (84-100%). These multiple coexisting or concentric identities – the "marble cake" phenomenon (Hermann, Risse-Kappen and Brewer 2004) – is well illustrated by the fact that 50% of those strongly identifying themselves with

regions, and 33% of those strongly identifying themselves with the nation, also strongly identify themselves with the EU. Party affiliation also has a rather strong impact upon affective identity: Liberals, Conservatives, and to a lesser degree Social Democrats, express strong attachment to Europe, while representatives of “Other” parties (in our sample dominated by the populists, with a few representatives of ethnic minorities) have much more reserved feelings towards the EU. Positive assessment of EU unification and high frequency of contact with EU institutions and officials correlate with strong attachment to the EU.

3.2 Threats to the EU: Frightened by Russia

The Lithuanian political elite, in stark contrast to their European peers, do not see the largest threats to the EU as internal ones; from obstinate national interests or economic inequalities among the EU Member States (Matonyte and Morkevičius 2013, 111). Rather, Lithuanian elites see the biggest threat to the EU as coming from an external source: Russian interference with European affairs (see Fig. 1). In the eyes of Lithuanian politicians, the gravity of the threat posed by Russia has significantly increased up from 65% in 2007 to above 80% in 2014. This growing trend is directly related to the Russian wars in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (since 2014), which intensified feelings of geopolitical insecurity in Lithuania. In 2014, respondents from the Lithuanian political elite were worried about the lack of unanimity and resoluteness in the EU, although the EU did of course decide to impose restrictive measures against the Russian Federation in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the deliberate destabilization of neighboring Ukraine. Overall, it is difficult to overstate the extent to which Russia represents a significant, threatening *Other* for the Lithuanian political elite, a significance which has increased over the years and has steadily distanced Lithuania, a small EU member state, from its past colonial ties.

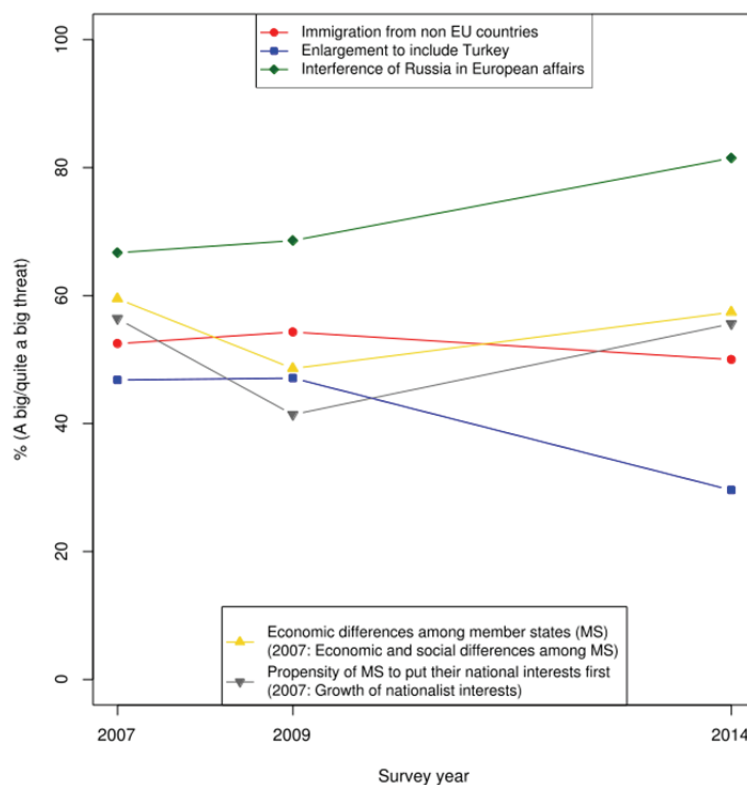
Russia is not the only external threat that Europeans and Lithuanians seem to disagree on the seriousness of. One common worry Europeans have, one that Lithuania does not share, is the prospective accession of Turkey into the EU. Lithuanian political elites perceive it as a decreasing threat (from almost 50% in 2007 to about 30% in 2014). Apparently, as the likelihood of EU enlargement to Turkey has become more improbable, this has corresponded with a decrease in the level of religious (Christian) anxiety. The decrease in xenophobic attitudes towards Turkey in 2014 also conveys the feeling of urgency to strengthen international defensive capacities vis-à-vis an increasingly aggressive Russia. Incidentally, our data clearly indicates that those Lithuanian elites who strongly fear Russia tend not to consider Turkey as a big threat to the EU.

The elite’s assessment of what they consider to be the principal internal threats to the EU has remained rather stable in Lithuania. After a decrease in the threat perception of nationalistic inclinations and economic differences among the EU

Member States in 2009, the trend went up again in 2014, which signals a worrisome reaction to the financial crisis of 2008 and to Eurozone problems.

Despite the dramatic increase in asylum-seekers and immigration since 2014, the Lithuanian political elite's perception of the threat to the EU posed by immigration from peoples of non-EU countries remained roughly the same during the entire period of our study (around 50% reporting it as a big or quite a big threat). In the 2014 survey, the perceived threat of immigration was falling well below the perceived threat posed by Russian interference in EU affairs (by 30% points), the economic differences among the EU Member States (by almost 10% points) and their nationalistic inclinations (by a bit more than 10% points).

Figure1: Perception of Threats for the EU (Lithuanian Political Elites: 2007, 2009, 2014)



Older Lithuanian politicians tend to identify immigration, nationalist inclinations and Turkey's potential membership as the most pressing threats to the EU, whereas the younger generation is more likely to fear Russia's interference in European affairs. Right-leaning Lithuanian elites largely think that immigra-

tion, Turkey and Russia are the primary threats to the EU, whereas those on the left are more inclined to emphasize the threats posed by economic and social differences among EU Member States. One's attachment to Europe also influences one's perceptions of the threats. Those members of the elite who feel strongly attached to Europe fully appreciate the original intent of the EU, and are consequently more likely to view nationalism and economic inequality between Member States as particular vexing threats to the EU; nevertheless, Russia is perceived as the most worrisome threat. Those members of elite who do not feel strongly attached to Europe tend to highlight the perceived threat posed by immigration from non-EU countries and EU enlargement to Turkey. Those who support further EU integration tend to be more fearful of Turkey and Russia, while those who believe EU integration has reached or exceeded its appropriate limit generally emphasize the perceived threats from rising nationalism and economic and social differences.

3.3 Trust in the EU Institutions: Moderate and Emotional

The extent to which Lithuanian political elites trust EU institutions has not significantly changed during the period 2007-2014, remaining quite moderate (6-7 points on a scale from 0 to 10). The overall positive attitude Lithuanian elites have towards EU institutions in general does not waver noticeably between different EU institutions in particular. For instance, the differences between Lithuanian parliamentarians' trust in the EP, the EC and the European Council of Ministers are negligible: in 2007 the most trusted was the EP (6.38) and the least trusted was the EC (6.29). In 2009, the EC became the most trusted (6.40) and trust in the Council of Ministers slightly decreased (to 6.19). Then, in 2014, trust in the Council of Ministers achieved its ever-highest level (6.93), while trust in the EP and EC increased only slightly (respectively to 6.63 and 6.61). This increase of trust in EU institutions in 2014 warrants further study. It may simply be the case that it is consistent with the general upward trend. It may also, however, reflect an isolated incident; namely, the Lithuanian Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2013, which was widely seen as successful by Lithuanian political elites, and their sentiments of trust in EU institutions may have been swayed accordingly (Vilpišauskas 2014a, 99).

It is important to note that trust in EU institutions among the Lithuanian political elite is neither based on nor differentiated by partisanship. Trust is, however, differentiated according to their affective attachment to Europe and their cognitive-evaluative views on European unification. Those feeling the strongest attachment to Europe display the highest trust in EU institutions, while those who trust the least – although few in number – generally believe that European unification has been overdone.

3.4 Preferences of Policy Making: Support for "De-Nationalization" and Transnational Policies

Lithuanian elites are inclined (more than 60% in 2014) to transfer decision making authority to the supranational (European) level in two transnational areas, immigration and environment policy; the level of support for supranational decision making in these two policy areas has significantly increased since 2007. Elites' support for European decision making in anti-crime policies has also steadily increased; in 2014 more than 50% of the Lithuanian elite were willing to transfer this competence to the EU. A similar increase is found in the area of unemployment – rightly considered a transnational policy field because of the free labor movement in the EU, or at the very least, because it is largely unsusceptible to national-level anti-unemployment policies. Labor policies present a particular challenge to Lithuania, which is experiencing painfully large emigration to other European countries.

Still, national political elites do wish to guard certain policy areas. The health care system is one such area. In 2014, only 3-4% of Lithuanian elites supported transferring decision making to the EU. It should be noted that there was a brief increase of support for transferring powers in 2009, but this was largely attributable to domestic politics: a conservative-liberal coalition government was implementing a harsh national austerity program and the health care sector suffered severe cuts.

One peculiar finding is that Lithuanian political elites are keen to transfer powers to the EU in areas that are traditionally owned by their respective parties and their own ideological leanings. For instance, left-leaning elites (in particular, Social Democrats) support EU governance of unemployment and health care. Right-leaning elites favour more EU involvement in anti-crime policy; on the other hand, they are reluctant to endorse common welfare policies of the EU. Those who are emotionally attached to Europe tend to support EU level governance in the areas of unemployment, anti-crime and health care, while those who are more indifferent to Europe are, unsurprisingly, not opposed to entrusting the EU with transnational policies on matters such as immigration and environmental issues.

3.5 Rampant Neo-Liberalism: the Quest of the Market Competitiveness

Recent rhetoric in Lithuania's public sphere would have casual observers believe social justice and the development of the welfare state were government priorities (Gudžinskas 2014), yet its elites continuously and increasingly favour free-market competitiveness over strengthening the social security system in the EU. In 2007 and 2009 only a slight majority (52-54%) of parliamentarians supported a competitive (*versus* socially-oriented) EU, while in 2014 their share had grown significantly (to 65%). This increase was even more surprising

since it occurred while the *Seimas* was dominated by Social Democrats and populists. This upsurge in neo-liberal attitudes conveys the Lithuanian elite's approval of the national austerity-based management of the financial crisis in Lithuania, and is consonant with their resentment towards the EU's costly rescue plans, especially the one offered to Greece. Their neo-liberal preferences imply that the Lithuanian political elite, across its political spectrum, favors economic growth at the expense of social solidarity.

If we break elites into their respective political party affiliations, we notice that the biggest attitudinal shift in neo-liberal preferences occurred amongst Conservative party parliamentarians; amongst their ranks, those who favoured competitiveness grew from 54% in 2007 to 85% in 2014. Social Democrats also demonstrated quite a remarkable swing of neo-liberal attitudes; in early 2007 they were evenly split between supporting competition and supporting social security, in 2009 the share of social security supporters jumped to 71%, but has since returned back to an even split.

The dynamics of the attitudinal shifts – fluctuating between promoting economic growth and bolstering social security – between the two leading and opposing parties is largely attributable to national electoral cycles, and was intensified by the economic crisis. Conservative party-led economic austerity policies began in 2009. While in opposition, the Social Democrats advocated for more transfers in social security. By 2014, however, the national economy had largely recovered under the coalition government, led by Social Democrats, which permitted the Social Democrats to return back to their default attitude: a neo-liberal preference for increasing market competitiveness.

There is an alternative explanation for the pro-market swing in the attitudes of the Lithuanian elite: they could be impressionable to the EU's approach towards economic development. In 2000-2010, the Lisbon strategy outlined the first milestones, while Europe 2020 provided further schemes for globally competitive market development in the EU. The EU could be, to put it simply, an agenda-setter in Lithuania. This would help explain, for instance, the decrease in pro-welfare views and the increase in neo-liberal attitudes among the Lithuanian Conservatives (who fervently emulate the German Christian Democrats).

Age and party affiliation are also important factors. Older respondents, members of the Social Democrat Party, and politicians who position themselves as leftists, all believe that the EU should be socially oriented. Conversely, the younger age cohort, Liberals, Conservatives, and self-positioned rightists, all favour a more competitive economy.

The elite's affective attachment to Europe, and the extent to which they have access to EU social networks, also has some explanatory power; Lithuanian politicians who feel more attached to Europe, and who have more intense contacts with EU institutions and representatives, demonstrate stronger pro-competitive attitudes.

3.6 Convinced Intergovernmentalists

The bulk of the Lithuanian political elite regards the EU member-states as central actors in the EU, and largely rejects the idea of a centralized EU government. This is attuned to the argument that elites of small “newborn” states tend to be very vigilant about state sovereignty and their political and economic authority (Steen 2015, 200) The strongest pro member-state views are expressed by the Lithuanian Liberals; they are opposed to expanding EU bureaucracy and the increase of regulatory intervention in general. Those members of the Lithuanian political elite who feel strongly attached to the EU, as well as those who are in frequent contact with EU institutions and representatives, more strongly favor the EU’s intergovernmental governance than those who are less immersed in European networks.

This surprising finding is best explained by the phenomenon of the “marble cake” and its associated concept of concentric identities (Hermann, Risse-Kappen and Brewer 2004). As discussed in 2.1, among elites a strong identification with the EU correlates with a strong identification with Lithuania. It would appear, then, that positive emotional attachment to the EU fosters patriotic feelings towards the nation-state Lithuania. Federalisation – the process by which the EC would become the principal EU government – is least acceptable to Lithuanian Conservatives, it is moderately supported by Social Democrats, and it is very acceptable to Liberals and populists. The latter are, however, rather skeptical towards the EU and perhaps this declarative sympathetic stance towards the EC represents their virulent dissatisfaction with politics at home in Lithuania. Yet, as observed in 2.3, among Lithuanian elites there is no significant partisan variation in terms of trust towards the EC (and other EU institutions). Therefore, the differentiated support for the federalisation of EU is clearly related to the ideological stances of the Lithuanian parties. The emotional attachment to the EU positively correlates with the inclination to strengthen the EC.

In the retrospective (2007-2009-2014), the Lithuanian elite’s support for intergovernmental governance of the EU is U-curved. The retreat to member-state centered stances in 2009 was diffused among all the reference groups (party affiliation, age, emotional attachment to Europe, the EU contact density, etc.). This temporal decrease in support for the inter-governmental governance was an indirect reaction to financial crisis, when the nation-state institutions were regarded as a better problem-solver, and while the EU was considered as a lender of the last resort.

3.7 EU Fairness and Responsiveness: Grievances of a Small State

The Lithuanian political elite largely believes that they are unfairly treated by the EU. Slightly less persecuted views are held by those elites with a stronger emotional attachment to the EU, those who favor further strengthening the EU,

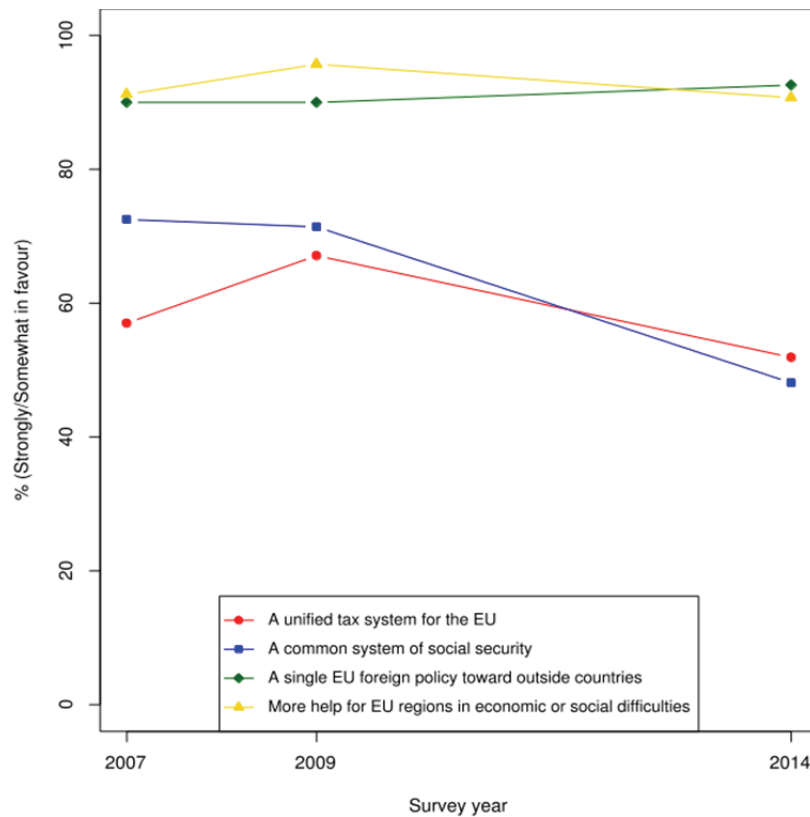
and those who have denser European networks. Established political parties in Lithuania tend to see fairness in EU politics, while the various populist parties are more skeptical about the EU. The attitude that the process of EU decision making gives too much weight to some (large) EU member-states is steadfast. The Lithuanian elite's perception that the EU mistreats its smaller states did not change during the period 2007-2014.

3.8 Projective Expectations for the EU Future: "Yes" to the Common EU Foreign Policy, but "No" to Common Taxation and Social Security

Views about the EU's future (in next 10 years) (see Fig. 2) display two general trends. First, the Lithuanian elite are rather united in their support (around 90%) for common EU foreign policy and for more assistance to the EU regions experiencing social and economic difficulties. However, quite a different trend is associated with the elite's attitudes towards the unification of the EU taxation and social security systems. Since 2009 the support for common taxation and social security system has dropped from 70% to 50%.

The strong and unequivocal support for common EU foreign policy reflects the willingness of elites from a small state, bordering Russia, to be part of a bigger whole and to benefit from pooled sovereignty in international relations, especially given the increasingly insecure contemporary geopolitical environment. The unified support of Lithuania's political elite for providing assistance to those EU regions that are experiencing social and economic difficulties also conveys the structural interests and appreciation of a new EU member-state, which is a net recipient of EU assistance. Meanwhile, the sharp decline in Lithuanian support for the pan-European common taxation and social security system is related to the hard evidence that the EU has inefficiently dealt with the prolonged economic crisis, particularly, in Greece. From another perspective, Lithuanians take pride in their success in dealing with the financial crisis on their own; they proudly trumpet that "I did it my way", so to speak.

Figure 2: Projections of the EU in the Next 10 Years (Lithuanian Political Elites: 2007, 2009, 2014)



Political ideologies significantly determine elite's support for the future unification of EU policies. Leftists, more so than rightists, support the idea of unified taxation, a common social security system, and the provision of assistance for regions experiencing difficulties. Those who think that the main aim of the EU is to provide better social security (*versus* economic competitiveness) generally support the idea of common social security and taxation, and are in favour of offering more regional assistance.

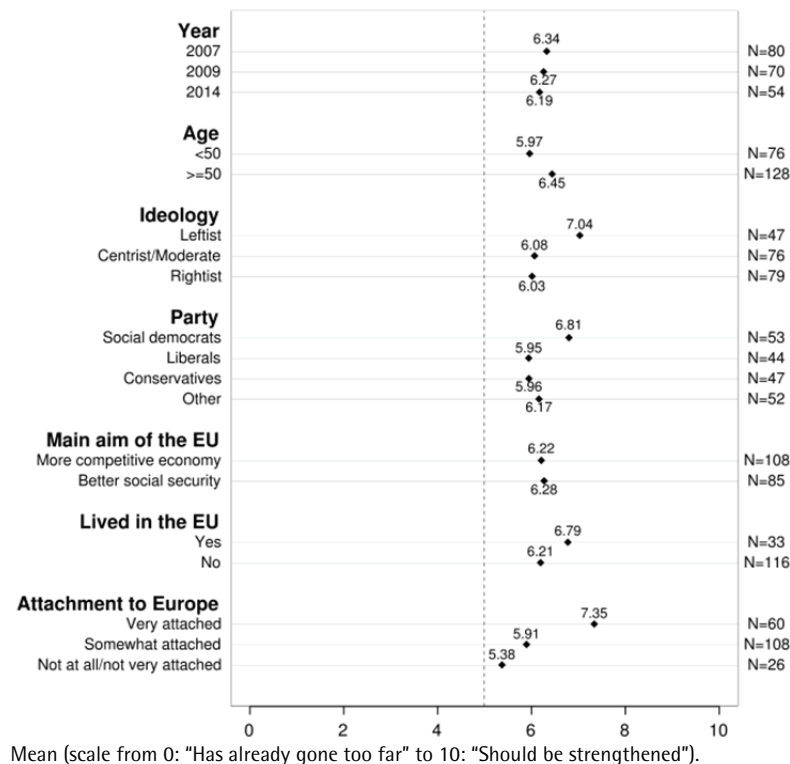
The visions that Lithuania's elites have for the future of the EU is linked with their relative affective attachments to Europe. Quite apparently, strong emotional attachment to Europe signifies concomitant support for a more unified future Europe. Those who believe that European unification has already gone too far are hostile to future movement towards unified EU foreign policies, increased regional assistance, and common taxation or social security systems.

3.9 Steady Support for European Unification

Support for further European unification (see Fig. 3) amongst Lithuanians changed hardly at all during the past ten years. Lithuanian elites stayed unified in their moderate (but in comparison to the other EU member-states, quite high) support for further EU expansion (6-7 points on the 11 point scale). In 2014, there was a slight decrease in support for further unification; it is not certain, but this trend may have been a temporary reaction to the financial crisis of 2008.

Variations in support for European unification are largely drawn along ideological and experiential lines. In Lithuania, the left leaning elite strongly support European unification. Also, and not surprisingly, those who have lived in another EU country, and those who feel a strong attachment to Europe, tend to support additional European unification. The biggest enthusiasts of further unification are elites in their old age; their generation spearheaded the European integration process in this small post-communist country, and they have apparently remained staunch proponents.

Figure 3: Attitude Towards European Unification (Lithuanian Political Elites: 2007, 2009, 2014)



3.10 Attitudes Towards the Economic Crisis Management: National Governments at the Forefront

In order to combat the financial crisis of 2008, the Lithuanian political elite (and the newly appointed Conservative-Liberal coalition government) implemented a harsh national austerity program starting in early 2009 (see sub-chapter 1.2). Driven by a nationalistic, self-reliant mood, the elites expressed a willingness to avoid the intervention and control of the EU (or, for that matter, the IMF). This defiant sentiment may be traced to a lingering resentment among the Lithuanian political elite related to their unsuccessful attempt to introduce the euro in 2007; Lithuania's financial and economic indicators did not withstand the tough scrutiny of EU authorities, and Lithuania failed by a small margin. Later on, however, after having successfully implemented national austerity policies and in a much different financial climate, Lithuania reengaged its euro-currency initiative. The willingness and resoluteness of the Lithuanian elite to introduce the euro in 2015 was as much a strong emotional show of support for the Euro-zone as it was a mere pragmatic calculation, seeking to reach a tangible immediate utility (Vilpišauskas 2014b, 240-242). Moreover, for Lithuanians the euro-currency also symbolically meant distancing itself from Russia even further, and a big step towards further European integration.

These national circumstances are reflected in Lithuania's political elite's attitudes towards the management of the economic crisis in early 2009. The 2009 survey shows that the prevailing mindset of Lithuanian political elites towards the economic crisis management was nationalistic. The top strategies for handling economic problems were perceived to be either autonomous or coordinated actions of national governments. The external intervention scenarios (EU or international financial institutions) were perceived to be the least desirable solutions. In fact, the national austerity program initiated by the Lithuanian government perfectly corresponded with the opinions expressed in our survey. Even though there were important differences in political party stances on the harshness of austerity measures (for instance, Social-Democrats, then in parliamentary opposition, were asking for more social security), the survey data indicated no significant differences among parties in their overall preference for the national government-led economic crisis management strategy.

4. Conclusions

During the first decade of Lithuania's EU membership, the European project did not produce any sharp dividing lines between the country's political elites. Lithuanian politicians remained consensually united and committed to the EU. They continue to positively assess their membership in the EU, increasingly express their support for the transfer of decision-making authority to suprana-

tional level, and are willing to further strengthen and enlarge the EU. Domestic political quarrels did not spill-over to the generally pro-European stances of Lithuania's political elite.

The financial crisis of 2008 could have threatened this consensus, but as we can clearly see now, as Lithuania navigated itself through the crisis by imposing upon itself a national austerity program, the political elite displayed increasing levels of *Europeanness*. Even though in general the Lithuanian political elite believes the EU unfairly treats Lithuanian interests, those attitudes are changing and Lithuanian politicians' support for the transfer of decision-making authority to the supranational level has been increasing. Strong pro-European positions are expressed by the Lithuanian elite's unequivocal and mounting promotion of a common foreign policy strategy. Geopolitical considerations attend this, and Lithuania's political elite increasingly considers Russia to pose an ominous threat and is alarmed by its interference in EU affairs. The Russian factor strongly anchors the *Europeanness* of Lithuania's political elite and bolsters their unity. This corroborates Steen's findings that in the Baltic states, neoliberal policies became a strategic means for indigenous control of the titular nation (i.e. Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian elites) in order to accomplish the paramount goal of safeguarding the reborn small nation-states against external threats (Steen 2015, 201). Our longitudinal case study of Lithuanian elites extends these insights into a more robust understanding of the development of the Europeanized nationalist type of neo-liberalism in the Baltic states. Before the financial crisis of 2008, it was mostly most visible in Estonia, easily detectable in Latvia, but not evident in Lithuania (Steen 2015, 198). After this huge international shock, however, it has now become visible across the entire political spectrum in Lithuania. Thus, we can safely generalize that the Baltic states (or, at least, their national elites) display a strong and sustainable trend of the Europeanized national neo-liberalism with all of its implications in social, economic and political domains.

However, Lithuania's political elite are not uniform in their attitudes towards the EU. Although party polarization is not pronounced in Lithuania, the members of various political parties and ideologies differ in their *Europeanness* according to noticeable patterns. Left-leaning political elites are to a much greater extent than the rightists interested in the transfer of unemployment and health care policies to supranational level, while right-leaning elites are more inclined to transfer the anti-crime policies to the EU. Social-Democrats are more supportive of common taxation and social security system in the EU, and they more strongly favor further strengthening the EU, than do either the Conservatives or the Liberals. In Lithuania, the intergovernmental vision of the EU is articulated by the Conservatives, while the Liberals are strongly committed that the member-states should remain central actors in the EU.

Two socio-demographic variables stand out as key indicators of the Lithuanian political elite's *Europeanness*: age, and personal embeddedness into European

networks. The affective attachment to Europe of those Lithuanian elite who have dense EU networks is higher. The younger elite, to a much greater extent, perceive Russia as a threat to the EU. Yet it is the older elite who are more supportive of the idea that the EU should be further integrated and enlarged.

This longitudinal study of Lithuanian political elites illustrates that interactions between the three major dimensions of *Europeanness* (its affective, cognitive-evaluative and projective dimensions) are strongly interrelated. Currently in Lithuania the political elite's *Europeanness* manifests itself through their increasingly high affective attachment to Europe, which compensates for a slight decrease in their cognitive-evaluative stance, and their projective support for future European unification is stable.

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