

Mobile Ideas, Resilient Values?

How well does the 'rich' concept of democracy travel?

Introduction¹

Among the different aspects of mobility, the mobility of ideas is one of the most important and intriguing. Beyond the obvious and very general observation that ideas move, lies an issue more complicated, but also more thought-provoking: some ideas move more easily than others. Neither the simplicity, geographical proximity, nor the usefulness of a specific idea is a safe predictor of whether it will catch on in another society. Moreover, while ideas do move, they also seem to change on the move. While my main research area is political cultures in Latvia and Lithuania, and, more specifically, the way in which the idea of democracy is received and perceived by the populations of these countries, I have also been puzzled by more than a decade-long observation of how, in Denmark and Latvia, two societies that are part of one region, democracy is perceived and practised very differently. When considering the mobility of ideas, therefore, it may be worth looking at the idea of democracy, and attempting to establish how mobile it has been.

One difficulty in examining the idea of democracy, of course, is that it is not a unitary and clearly definable concept. Not only are many different political systems currently classified as democracies, but also the normative thinking on democracy offers a variety of models. A society does not just 'have democracy'; rather it adopts, exercises and often takes pride in a specific kind of democracy that will be more or less different from that in other societies also classified as democracies. The 'western' societies of the Baltic Sea Rim, the Nordic countries and to some extent also Germany, are special in the sense that they broadly support and practise a 'rich' version of democracy, based on values of participationism, civicness, deliberative democracy, social equality, and enlightened sovereignty of the people. For a decade and a half,

these societies have shared a region with a number of societies in the process of democratic transformation. One aspect of this historic transformation seems to have received little attention: [the fact that democratisation means more than societies agreeing to become democratic](#). It also means that, consciously so or not, [they](#) will [necessarily](#) be choosing what *kind* of democracy to build.

[We can now](#) return to the concept of ideational mobility. If intensive regional interaction amplifies ideational mobility, which is the process of [the](#) movement and adoption of ideas, then the post-communist societies would be particularly influenced by the values and concepts of democracy characteristic of their regional neighbours. Here I limit my discussion to the cases of recent Latvian and Lithuanian democratisation and ask [how strong the influence of the distinctive Nordic ‘rich’ concepts of democracy on these societies has been?](#) [The relevance of the mobility of democracy, one of the most influential ideas of recent decade](#), goes well beyond the limits of the Baltic Sea region. The answer to [the above](#) question would require a great deal of multifaceted research. [What I propose here is to take an exploratory look at the issue](#). First, I address two alternative theoretical frameworks for conceptualising mobility. [I then go on to assess](#) some evidence of the real state of democratic values in Latvia and Lithuania. What follows is a mind experiment aimed at opening a discussion, rather than settling it. It brings together several issues and claims that in themselves are [the](#) subject of debate.

Exporting democracy: [An historical anecdote](#)

In 1990, against the backdrop of the turbulent political transformation of the Soviet Union, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a structure aimed explicitly at the post-communist societies on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. The name chosen for this structure was just as bold as its statement of purpose. The aim of the *Danish Democracy Foundation* was to ‘promote democratic development in the countries concerned by establishing contact between citizens of Denmark and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Danish

¹ I would like to thank Magdalena Zolkos of the University of Copenhagen and the anonymous reviewer for the highly stimulating critique and suggestions they offered during my work on this paper.

democratic traditions have served as a source of inspiration to the many Central and Eastern Europeans who have been invited to Denmark by Danish organisations, associations and individuals since 1990 with the help of the Fund... The majority of the projects supported by the Fund have involved visits to Denmark. One important objective was to give visitors an insight into how Danish democracy works at different levels.’²

In other words, the plan was to export the idea of democracy and, **in particular**, *the specific Danish idea (understanding) of democracy*. **How realistic was the expectation that a good idea could be exported?** This particular historical episode³ leads to some interesting theoretical questions about the nature and limits of the mobility of ideas.

Two Perspectives: Ideas and Culture

The notion of ideational change is complex due to the **multiple meanings** of the concept of *idea* itself. It can be **related to** different phenomena – ideas as technological knowledge (know-how) and ideas as values. The former obviously requires knowing and applying. The latter is about evaluating and believing. Accordingly, this enables two alternative theoretical perspectives on ideational change: *mobile ideas* vs. *resilient values*. The former perspective focuses on ideas seen primarily as universal, adoptable and context-free concepts. At the heart of the latter perspective, on the other hand, are cultures as context-rich patterns that are primarily socialised into, rather than transferred spatially.

The two perspectives form a tension field within which the realities of ideational change can be seen. In real-life democratisation processes, which are the topic of discussion here, mobile ideas meet a powerful counteragent in the indigenous cultures and value systems. The story of a

² *Danish Assistance to Central and Eastern Europe*. Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2003, p. 29. (<http://www.um.dk/udenrigspolitik/oesteuropa/oeststoette/825590stUK-72.pdf> [March 26, 2004].)

³ It should be noted that this episode has been personally relevant to the present writer, who has been a grateful recipient of a grant by the Democracy Foundation, and who has also assisted numerous activities supported by it.

triumphant march of democracy becomes a tale of two democracies: democracy as an idea and democracy as a cultural pattern organising and directing the political system.

The cultural perspective to which I will return later fits easily **into** the existing theories and approaches of social science. The notion of mobile ideas, on the other hand, may **still** need explaining and conceptualising. This is a challenge that cannot be dealt with here, and I will therefore simply try to consider ideational mobility based on general observations and reasoning.

Perspective one: Mobile ideas

From the mobile ideas perspective, ideas **are** transferable, objective, context-free knowledge, a know-how, a technology that can be known and applied universally. They can be replicated under different and controlled circumstances. Within this context the phenomenon of ideational mobility is easily explained, i.e. understood in this way, ideas travel easily.

For the purposes of the following discussion, it will be useful to specify what I mean by the mobility of ideas: the dissemination within a society of thoughts, knowledge, values, and concepts not previously present in that society in a way that influences the society in a significant way. This definition stresses the ‘spatial’ aspect of mobility and implies a limitation in terms of time scope, as it only pertains to the process of **the** entrance of new *ideas* into a spatially delimited territory (a society). It is different from the circulation and development of ideas within a society, which may be called ‘temporal’ ideational mobility and is the subject of history of ideas. We can therefore only speak of how an idea travelled from one society to another as long as, and to the extent that, this idea is perceived as ‘foreign’ and novel.

How do ideas move? Within the mobile ideas perspective, we can list several factors that may facilitate ideational mobility:

- *the power of example* projected by the society from which the idea originates. This relates to the image of power and prestige projected by the society, including **the** extent to which the society of origin is perceived as successful, and reliable as a source of idea borrowing.
- *the attractiveness of the idea as such*, i.e. whether the idea is perceived as suitable and instrumental for dealing with the societal, group, or individual demands, either technological or moral.
- *the strength and breadth of the channels of interaction* through which ideas are communicated. This defines the institutional capacities and infrastructures available for communication of ideas between societies.

- *the proximity of the source of ideational borrowing*. This affects both the cost of transactions (physical contact, linguistic barriers etc.) and the interests that actors have in investments (due to interdependence within regions, the geopolitical topicality of investing would naturally be higher for neighbours). Proximity also ensures that close neighbours can have both a good reputation with each other based on a long history of contacts and established cultural patterns of communication. Close neighbourhood can, however, be a mixed blessing in terms of historical dispute and rivalries, and create love-hate relationships.
- *the strength of the agents of ideational change* in the recipient society, such as economic and political elites, segments of civic society and interest groups. This reflects their influence, size, and resourcefulness in promoting the transfer of ideas within the recipient society.⁴

The case in question scores high on most of these factor groups. Denmark and Sweden project a strong image of successful small-size nation states and strong economies, which is especially attractive to the young Baltic nations preoccupied with cementing their positions as small nation-states and establishing sustainable economies. The Nordic welfare states are widely perceived as close-to-perfect combinations of effective market economies with mechanisms for ensuring a high degree of social and political equality. Outside the Nordic countries this is widely known as ‘the Scandinavian model’, a wording already suggestive of an example that deserves to be followed.⁵

⁴ A somewhat similar conceptualisation of ideational mobility has been suggested by Sharon Werning Rivera (Sharon Werning Rivera: »Elites and the Diffusion of Foreign Models in Russia.« In: *Political Studies* 52 (2004), pp. 43-62). In a study of the diffusion of foreign ideas and norms among Russian elites, Rivera proposes three possible explanations of why Russian policy makers emulate some countries rather than others: *comparability* (geographical, historical or cultural similarity), *prestige*, and *performance*. Rivera suggests that the prestige of the example-giving country is more important than other factors. The crux of Rivera’s argument is different from the discussion here, however. While Rivera is concerned with the relative importance of different factors of ideational mobility, the issue here is the overall strength of these factors compared with the impact of indigenous political values.

⁵ In a survey conducted in Latvia in November 2003, the respondents (n=1600) were asked whether they would prefer the ‘Scandinavian’ model (high taxes, high social security) or the ‘American’ model (low taxes, low

Historically, the level of cohesion between Nordic and Baltic societies has been considerable due to [the](#) mobility of goods and people, as well as [to](#) the links to the Baltic German cultural sphere. Yet this cohesion and proximity was not strong enough to result in serious conflicts, rivalries or animosity. This [conflict-free](#), if sometimes estranged⁶, [relationship](#) between the Nordic and the Baltic societies was transformed in the early 1990s, when the Baltic countries started to move towards independence and integration with the western countries. Denmark and Sweden adopted activist policies towards the Baltic states and became vociferous advocates and sponsors of Baltic independence and integration into European and transatlantic structures such as [the](#) EU and NATO.⁷ These efforts have created a generally positive image of the Nordic countries among the Baltic populations.

The proximity [of](#) the Nordic and Baltic countries was fully utilised through the establishment of numerous broad and resourceful channels of interaction. During the last fifteen years, the Nordic countries, especially Denmark and Sweden, have established an extensive range of institutions aimed at interacting with, and assisting, the Baltic states in nearly every possible area. The range of such institutions spans from unilateral activities such as the Danish Cultural Institute in the Baltic countries, through joint Nordic efforts, most notably [the](#) Nordic Council of Ministers' Adjacent Areas Programme, to broader regional and European frameworks such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States and [the](#) EU's Nordic dimension. The strong political presence of the Nordic countries is paralleled by their economic weight in Latvia and Lithuania. Denmark and Sweden are important economic partners for the two Baltic states through their leadership as foreign investors and high [ranking](#) as trade partners.⁸ This heavy investment in

social security). 48 per cent of the respondents endorsed the 'Scandinavian' model while 30 per cent preferred the 'American' model. (Author's own data collected by *Latvian Fakti*, Riga.)

⁶ Such estrangement did not only exist during the Soviet period, but was also tangible in the [1930s](#), when the Baltic countries reverted to authoritarian regimes while the Nordic countries retained their democratic system of government both in shape and essence.

⁷ The actual policies adopted by Denmark and Sweden differed, especially regarding Baltic NATO membership, Swedish policy being more cautious and bound by its own neutrality. Yet the general direction in both cases has been unconditionally supportive of Baltic independence and integration into the west.

⁸ In 2003, Sweden ranked as third largest, and Denmark as sixth largest among Latvia's foreign trade partners (<http://www.em.gov.lv/em/2nd/?cat=2326>, [9 July 2004]). In 2003, Denmark and Sweden ranked as sixth

involvement with the Baltics, which was actively taken advantage of and supported by the Baltic states, has resulted in the emergence of numerous and extensive networks of interaction and communication between different segments of society, starting with children's rights NGOs, through businesses to civil servants and officials of various ranks. This growth in the volume of interaction was accompanied by a sharp decrease in communication costs due to lower travel costs, the abolition of visa requirements, and increasing proficiency in English, which minimised the language barrier. In this way, the 'logistic proximity' of the Nordic and the Baltic countries has increased dramatically over the last fifteen years.

An important aspect of Nordic efforts in the Baltics has been assistance with the processes of democratisation. According to an official Nordic Council of Ministers statement from 1996, some of the specific goals of neighbourhood cooperation were 'to strengthen democracy... [and] to widen the community of shared values with the northern parts of Europe.'⁹ These were not just political declarations, but real goals that were consistently backed both financially and institutionally. The structure and content of the activities of the abovementioned Danish Democracy Foundation is a characteristic example of these policies aimed at promoting democracy *as understood in the Nordic societies*. The democratic idea has appealed to Baltic states, for their part, if only for reasons of geopolitical expediency, and as the key to the membership of western institutions. It has also become a central element of official political discourse in the Baltic countries.

To sum up, the two Nordic countries, Denmark and Sweden, have become powerful regional actors with a positive image and strong bonds to the Baltic countries. Within the 'mobile

and seventh largest among Lithuania's foreign trade partners, judged by its total trade turnover (<http://www.lda.lt/buy.trade.statistics.html#2> [9 July 2004]). In terms of foreign direct investment, the importance of Denmark and Sweden is even more prominent. In 2002, in Latvia Sweden stood for 12.8 per cent of the total FDI and Denmark for 11.1 per cent, making them the first and third biggest investors respectively (www.balticdata.info/latvia/macro_economics/latvia_macro_economics_foreign_direct_investments_summary.htm [9 July 2004]). In the cumulative FDI in Lithuania in 2003, Denmark had a share of 17.2 per cent, and Sweden a share of 15.3 per cent, the first and second most important sources of FDI (http://www.balticdata.info/lithuania/macro_economics/lithuania_macro_economics_foreign_direct_investments.htm [9 July 2004]).

ideas' perspective, it seems logical to expect that their attempts to 'export' the idea of democracy to the neighbouring countries of Latvia and Lithuania should succeed.

Perspective 2: Resilient Values

Contrasting with this mobile ideas approach is the cultural approach, which treats ideas as values. Values are not just knowledge or information, but are subjective, non-empirical and contextualised, and are based on sentiments. Values can be seen primarily as indigenous, rooted in cultures and societies; not as monadic, mobile entities, but as interdependent elements of value systems. From this point of view, ideational mobility is understood as a process of the embedding of values.

Explaining ideational mobility as value change fits easily into the culturalist tradition in social science. The culturalist approach as distinct, for example, from institutionalist, economic, or rational choice approaches assigns primary importance to culture as a determinant of social phenomena. In this it is inspired by the Parsonian theory, which ascribes to culture the latent 'function' of pattern maintenance. Despite the great variety of definitions of culture, it can generally be understood as subjective belief systems including values, norms, and attitudes. The core of the concept is expressed by Harry Eckstein: 'cultures are the variable and cumulatively learned patterns of orientations to action in societies.'¹⁰ Cultures are not reducible to multiple elements that can be picked and chosen at will, but are socially constructed.¹¹ Although cultures are not just learnt, but also re-learned, the cumulative nature of this process implies that this learning is bound to a specific context. This does not mean that cultures do not change, but rather

⁹ *Evaluation of the Nordic Council of Ministers' activities in the Adjacent Areas* (<http://www.norden.org/naromraaden/uk/naer-m-app.pdf> [9 July 2004]), 8-9.

¹⁰ Harry Eckstein: »Social Science as Cultural Science, Rational Choice as Metaphysics.« In: Richard J. Ellis/Michael Thompson (eds.): *Culture Matters: Essays in Honor of Aaron Wildavsky*. Colorado: Westview Press 1997, p. 26.

¹¹ The literature on political value socialisation is too extensive to be reviewed here, but an interpretation of the issue from the political culture perspective that takes into account the recent criticisms can be found, for example, in Harry Eckstein: *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability and Change*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1993; Harry Eckstein: »Culture as a Foundation Concept for the Social Sciences.« In: *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 8 (1996:4), pp. 471-497. See also the discussion in Richard W. Wilson: *Compliance Ideologies: Rethinking Political Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992.

that the scope of such change is always limited. As cultures are self-reproduced, they do not change as a direct result of a shift in social conditions. Accordingly, values are conditioned by the whole body of previous cultural socialisation and **cannot easily be imposed through voluntaristic effort from outside the initial cultural context**. In this sense, values are resilient.

It is logical to suggest that ideas relating to the political **realm**, including the idea of democracy, can be interpreted as political values. A theoretical framework for this is provided by the concept of political culture, which is a more specific implementation of the culturalist approach described above. According to a classical definition by Gabriel Almond, political culture ‘has cognitive, affective, and evaluative components; it includes knowledge and beliefs about political reality, feelings with respect to politics, and commitments to political values. Also, the content of political culture is the result of childhood socialisation, education, media exposure, and adult experiences with governmental, social, and economic performance.’¹² It is worth noting that Almond’s definition shows how the ‘context-bound’ character of culture also applies to political values.

How do ideas **become** rooted / culturally embedded within the resilient values perspective? What are the chances **of ideas being** adopted? It is probably safe to say that ideas only **acquire** power when applied within social structures in a significant way. Only through this process of socialisation can they **become** embedded within cultures, and internalised in the value system. It seems that **the** rooting and embedding of ideas from outside the indigenous value systems can be effective due to the following factors:

- import with imposed social structures (system export);
- joining global structures and global communities;
- de-parochialisation of thought through (slow) culture change.

From this perspective, the **seemingly** benign term ‘ideational mobility’, understood as the process of **the** adoption of complex ideational realities and value change, may often conceal

¹² Gabriel A. Almond: *A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science*. London: SAGE 1990, p. 144.

stories of traumatising cognitive pressures and identity shocks. This fully applies to the processes that the post-communist societies have been going through.

To sum up, while idea as a value fits into the cultural perspective of resilient values, idea as technological knowledge (know-how) is more receptive to the mobile ideas approach.

Democracy ‘rich’ and democracy ‘light’

We can now address the specific issue of **the** mobility of the idea of democracy. The two perspectives on **the** mobility of ideas described above suggest two ways of looking at the process of **the** dissemination of the idea of democracy. Along the lines of the mobile ideas perspective such dissemination is easily seen as a process of **the** importation of technology, while the resilient values perspective treats democracy as a value, a context-rich idea. These different perspectives have implications for the answer to our question: To what extent can the idea of democracy be transferred from one society to another?

From the resilient values perspective, democracy not **only** explains how the system of government can fulfil pragmatically defined criteria of efficacy, but also points **to** the independent moral value of rule ‘by the people, for the people’. Although the idea of democracy may be borrowed from outside, democratisation is primarily a consequence of the social, political, and cultural evolution of a society. It is a result of protracted and painful self-reflection by a society discussing and choosing its values and concepts of good, including concepts of good government; **and it is also** a response to social and economic pressures. In its pure form this perspective does not **explain** well how the idea of democracy can be mobile. In the case discussed here, it does not clarify reasons for the scope and speed of the recent democratic transformations in Latvia and Lithuania. **Nevertheless**, its sociological characterisation of the complexity of the process of **the** *rooting* of democratic values (regardless of their origin) may still be valid.

Understood within the mobile ideas perspective, democracy can be imported into a society from the outside; **it does not appear through discourse**, as a value, but simply as a specific technology of government, an institutional design that a society may be pressed to accept for practical reasons such as **the** direct demands of the external environment, as an answer to the challenges of modernisation etc.¹³ Democracy as **the** technology of government has been implanted effectively in most post-communist states, including Latvia and Lithuania, and the external pressures of European integration and global geopolitical forces have been an important element in securing democratic consolidation on the level of political systems. Of course, in real-life democratisation processes, both internal and external factors are at play.¹⁴ This is true as long as democracy is understood as one, clearly definable technological concept. **An** important characteristic of technology is that it can be described in universal, context-free language and can only be interpreted in one way. But as was mentioned **at** the beginning, democracy is not an unambiguous concept, and can be understood as more than just technology of government.

The contingency of the concept of democracy opens **up** a third way of looking at the matter, **thus** avoiding the limitations of the two approaches just discussed. Democracy can be analysed as an idea coming from outside, i.e. a phenomenon of ideational mobility, while at the same time remaining a context-rich value described within the cultural perspective. The ‘rich’ Nordic concepts of democracy are just such an idea. Can the idea of democracy be mobile in this form? Can it be transferred from one society to another **while** retaining its value context? As the ‘rich’ concepts of democracy were neither native to Latvia and Lithuania, nor imposed **forcibly**

¹³ As Magdalena Zolkos correctly commented **on** the draft of this paper, the inside / outside distinction may be associated with the more usual distinction between ‘democracy from above’ and ‘democracy from below’. There is certainly a correlation between these two dimensions, and democracy from outside is often implemented from above. Yet opposite can also be true: foreign ideas can equally inspire not only elites, but also popular democratic movements (the Eastern European democratisations in 1990-ies being a prime example of this). Thus the role of masses and elites in the democratisation processes is an important and complicated issue. A more complex and sociologically more cogent argument can be made by introducing intra-societal and subcultural levels of analysis. This is not the purpose of analysis here and is not strictly necessary in the present cases of industrialised mass societies whose new elites share their social and cultural origin with the bulk of the population. This issue deserves a more detailed treatment than it can be afforded here, and is therefore deliberately left out.

¹⁴ It is doubtful whether it is possible to speak of **the** mobility of the idea of democracy *in general* in **recent** decades, as the general concept had **long before** become part of **indigenous discourse** both in Latvia and Lithuania.

from outside, we propose to explore whether there is empirical evidence of the mobility of such a context-rich idea of democracy.

Before examining the evidence, it will be useful to give a short outline of the content of the ‘context-rich’ Nordic ideas of democracy. The salient features of the democratic vision of the Nordic countries can perhaps be best described as an identity community based on egalitarian social and democratic values: deliberative, participatory, and contestatory¹⁵ predisposition, recognition, redistribution, and education. In a comparative study of Nordic versus East Asian popular beliefs about good government, Geir Helgesen and Uichol Kim may be close to the truth when they say that Nordic democracy ‘as a system has been practised with *dialogue* as a key word.’¹⁶ Another salient feature of the Nordic vision of democracy is the belief that socio-economic emancipation is at the root of political equality.¹⁷ The term ‘democracy’ is thus extended to mean more than just a form of government; it becomes a societal order and an identity. In this sense we can talk about the ‘rich’ idea of democracy.

Importantly, the abovementioned ideas are not an ideological territory occupied solely by social-democratic parties, but are widely shared across the whole political spectrum and supported by overwhelming majorities of the Nordic populations. This is indeed the ideal type ‘Scandinavian exceptionalism’,¹⁸ reflecting a desired self-image rather than the political reality. Nevertheless, this self-image remains the normative compass directing the political life of the Nordic societies.

¹⁵ Contestatory democracy is a less well known normative concept meaning ‘a procedure that would enable people, not to veto public decisions ..., but to call them into question ... and to trigger a review in a forum that they and others can endorse as an impartial court of appeal.’ Philip Pettit: »Republican Freedom and contestatory democratization.« In: Ian Shapiro/ Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.): *Democracy's Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, p. 179.

¹⁶ Geir Helgesen /Uichol Kim: *Good Government: Nordic and East Asian Perspectives*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press 2002, p.53.

¹⁷ In Helgesen and Kim’s words, this is reflected in ‘the way in which private and collective economies have been seen as interdependent; the way in which education has been regarded as an effort to lessen the gap between the gifted and the not-so-gifted; the provision of free educational opportunities for all; the view that health care is a human right regardless of an individual’s social position or economic power; the tolerance of wealth only in not-too-lavish; and the idea that poverty is the disgrace of a true democratic society.’ (Helgesen / Kim: *Good Government*, p.53.)

Democratic values in Latvia and Lithuania: Some evidence

How much does this ‘third perspective’ really work in the case of the two Baltic countries? Has the ‘rich’ idea of democracy practised in the Nordic countries really affected their Baltic neighbours? The evidence is to be found, not in an analysis of the institutional setup of the societies, but in the values and ideas underlying these institutions.¹⁹ While there has been no analysis of how specific ‘Nordic’ values are perceived in the two Baltic societies, we do have a number of studies which explore the overall strength and content of democratic values there. Their results are sufficient for our preliminary discussion.

Latvia and Lithuania are good cases for a comparative study of democratic consolidation. While the early history and the ethnic and linguistic setup of the two nations differ considerably, there are also some profound similarities between them. Apart from having fairly similar social, economic, geographical, cultural, linguistic and other traits, Latvia and Lithuania have also had a comparable historical development over the last two hundred years, especially in the 20th century, when both states experienced a similar historical path leading from post-imperial national republic-building, (although they deliberately abandoned democracy in favour of populist authoritarian regimes) to Soviet occupation. Because of these recent historical experiences, both societies are characterised by an intense national identity and an historical self-image of a ‘small’ ethno-cultural group long dominated and victimised by expansionist and far more powerful neighbour states. The processes of democratic transition, too, have been quite similar in Latvia and Lithuania. They were initiated and completed concurrently within similar domestic contexts, and under the influence of the same international milieu.²⁰

¹⁸ Jorgen Goul Andersen/Jens Hoff: *Democracy and Citizenship in Scandinavia*. Houndmills, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2001.

¹⁹ Unfortunately, there seems to be no or little content analysis or grounded-theory studies of perceptions of democracy in Latvia and Lithuania, except for the now somewhat outdated Lithuanian content analysis by Jolanta Palidauškaite: *The Development of Lithuanian Political Culture During the Re-establishment and Strengthening of Independence* (A summary of a doctoral dissertation). Kaunas 1996.

²⁰ Characteristically, this ‘fate community’ is also reflected in the public perceptions and the ideology of the independence movement, which speak of ‘sister nations’. This perception was most colourfully exposed by the so-called Baltic Way action in August 1989, when approximately 2 million people from Lithuania, Latvia and

The two countries also remain relevant cases for a study of democratic consolidation on the level of political cultures. After some ten years of political change in Lithuania and Latvia it has been broadly assumed that the political systems of both countries have changed beyond recognition, abandoning the legacy of the Soviet period and establishing a firm and broadly supported commitment to western-style liberal democracy.²¹ This has also been acknowledged politically [with the accession of both countries](#) to the European Union and NATO, which presupposed compliance with certain criteria for democratic development. Yet recent studies of the Latvian and Lithuanian transition democracies testify to uncertainty as to whether the ‘emerging democracies’ will succeed as governments without perverting their intended democratic nature.²² While democratic consolidation on the political *system* level is no longer in doubt, the question remains whether these democracies are consolidated on the political culture level. The abovementioned studies suggest that the value systems of the two societies are not biased towards a democratic system of government, but, on the contrary, have retained strong authoritarian features dating back to the Soviet as well as [to earlier](#) periods. There is a [clash](#) between the largely consistent nominal acceptance of democracy in general terms, especially on

Estonia stood on the Vilnius-Tallinn road, holding hands, forming a living chain measuring nearly 600 km in length. The reality and the history of Baltic unity, however, is more complicated. Historically, [not](#) only have the Baltic states failed to create stable alliances, they have also generally been perceived as ‘strangers’ by their Nordic neighbours (see Inesis Feldmanis/Aivars Stranga: *The destiny of the Baltic Entente, 1934 – 1940* (transl. by K. Streips). Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs 1994.

²¹ For an example of an [optimistic](#) assessment, see Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World* report, which is also the most influential world-wide measurement of state of democracy. The 2004 report assigned top ratings to Latvia and Lithuania (*Freedom in the World 2004: Table of Independent Countries. Comparative Measures of Freedom*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2004/table2004.pdf> [5 July 2004]. Despite the obvious difference between *freedom* and *democracy*, this semantic nuance is normally disregarded in practice, starting with Freedom House’s own mission statement (see on the same web-site).

²² Some recent examples are studies by Richard Rose/William Mishler/Christian Haerpfer: *Democracy and its Alternatives: Understanding Post-communist Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1998, by Christian W. Haerpfer: *Democracy and Enlargement in Post-Communist Europe*. London and New York: Routledge 2002, and by Richard D. Anderson et al. (eds.): *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy*. Oxford: Princeton University Press 2001, Detlef Pollack, et al. (eds.): *Political Culture in Post-communist Europe: Attitudes in New Democracies*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2003, Mindaugas Degutis: »Lietuvos politinė kultūra visuomenės kaitos salygomis (Lithuanian political culture in a changing society).« In: Algimantas Jankauskas (ed.): *Politinė kultūra ir visuomenės kaita*. Vilnius: Vilnius Univ. Press 2002. An example of a divergent point of view is found in Kristin J. Broderick: *The Economy and Political Culture in New Democracies. An Analysis of Political Support in Central and Eastern Europe*. Aldershot, Burlington, Singapore and Sydney: Ashgate 2000.

the level of public discourse, on the one **hand**, and the ambivalent position democracy has assumed in the value systems of the populations, **on the other**. Thus, while the available research on the political cultures of the Latvian and Lithuanian societies **poses** more questions than it answers, the general impression is that the issue of democratic stability²³ in the longer run is still relevant for both countries.

A recent study by Haerpfer is emblematic in its cautious conclusions about the cultural rooting of democratic values in the two countries. Analysing the democratic transformations in Eastern Europe, including post-communist Northern Europe, Haerpfer suggests a classification into consolidated democracies, emerging democracies, and ‘transforming societies with an unknown outcome’.²⁴ Both Latvia and Lithuania are included in the last category of countries, where democracy is only one **of** several possible **systems of government** that can result from the political transformation. Although these conclusions seem not to take into account the constraints on the freedom of regime choice **placed** on these countries by EU and NATO membership,²⁵ Haerpfer’s most important finding – that democracy in the two countries is very weakly supported by the citizens – seems to be supported by the main body of survey data. One of the most characteristic pieces of data **of relevance to** our argument is shown in Table 1.

Table 1²⁶

Do you agree with the view that it is best to get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader who can quickly decide things?			
	1996, per cent	1998, per cent	Change between 1996 and 1998, per cent
Latvia	57	61	4
Lithuania	37	49	12

²³ The **meaning** of democratic stability **is, in our view, clearly expressed in the three principles** suggested by Eckstein: *persistence of pattern, decisional effectiveness and authenticity*. See Harry Eckstein: *Regarding Politics*, p. 184.

²⁴ Christian W. Haerpfer, *Democracy and Enlargement in Post-Communist Europe*, p. 143.

²⁵ This point is also put forward in the same context by Kjetil Duvold: »Democracy and Its Enemies: The Prevalence of Non-democratic Preferences in the Baltic Countries.« Paper presented at the conference »The Baltic States: New Europe or Old?« University of Glasgow 22-23 Jan. 2004.

²⁶ Adopted from Haerpfer, *Democracy and Enlargement*, p. 34.

The high percentages of positive answers definitely do not support the suggestion that democratic values [are](#) taking root and becoming stronger in the two societies. A similarly posed question from the New Europe Barometer (Table 2²⁷) shows an even more alarming trend: in 2001 about four out of ten respondents would approve of [the suspension](#) of parliament and a ban on political parties, twice as many as eight years earlier, in 1993.

Table 2

Q. If Parliament were suspended and parties banned, would you approve or disapprove?

	Autumn 93	Spring 95	Autumn 96	Spring 00	Autumn 01
	(Percent agreeing)				
Estonians	18	11	17	-	25
Estonian Russians	19	20	30	-	41
Latvians	20	33	38	39	39
Latvian Russians	20	28	44	37	36
Lithuanians	22	32	23	35	45
Lithuanian Russians	16	21	20	35	40

Source: New Baltic Barometers I to V.

The same tendency [also emerges from](#) some other data from the same New Europe Barometer 2001 [which shows](#) overwhelming support [for](#) undemocratic ways of choosing [the](#) government. While four out of ten respondents in both countries long for [rule by a strong leader](#), an overwhelming majority of about seven out of ten respondents would like to see an appointed meritocratic government instead of [a democratically chosen one](#) (Table 3²⁸).

Table 3

‘Our present system of government is not the only one that this country [has](#) had. Some people say that we would be better off if the country [were](#) governed differently. What do you think? **Options:** [We](#)

²⁷ Baltic Trends, <http://www.balticvoices.org/BALTREND.htm#56> [26 May 2004].

²⁸ Adopted from: *New Europe Barometer*, 2001 (data taken from paper by Kjetil Duvold/Thomas Sedelius: »Alternatives to Democracy: The Resilience of Elitist and Authoritarian Preferences in Central and Eastern Europe.« Paper presented at the CEPSA Annual Conference in Vilnius, 9-11 Oct. 2003.

should return to Communist rule / The army should govern the country / **It would be** best to get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader who can quickly decide everything / A government of **national unity** with only the best people should replace government by elected people.’

	Communist Rule	Army Rule	Rule by strong leader	Elitist Rule
Latvia	7	4	40	73
Lithuania	14	6	40	67

These survey results show little difference between Latvia and Lithuania and are also supported by other evaluations. When, characterising the values underlying Lithuanian democracy, Degutis observes that ‘a subject and cynical political culture reigns in Lithuania’, and that distrust and passivity are some of its main features;²⁹ this **can be said to apply** in equal measure to the Latvian case.

The available empirical research on Latvian and Lithuanian political culture **certainly** does not point in the direction of **the** ‘rich’ Nordic concept of democracy. On the contrary, the political orientations described above are consistent with a limited post-communist democracy.

The idea of democracy travels best in its ‘light’ form?

We can now summarise our analysis. The idea of democracy has obviously had a great influence on institution-building in the Baltic countries. It has also influenced the **citizens’** patterns of behaviour. In this sense, the idea of democracy has been mobile and has gained ground in **both** Baltic states. This observation is also **consistent** with the fact that democratic institution building in **both** Baltic States has been the work of elites guided by the ideology of ‘return to the West’ and by perceptions of strategic national interest.³⁰ In this process, the

²⁹ Degutis, »Lietuvos politinė kultūra«, pp. 69-69. Palidauskaite comes to similar conclusions in *The Development of Lithuanian Political Culture*.

³⁰ As Stephen Hanson observes in relation to the motivations behind **democratisation in** Eastern European countries, the political elites ‘embrace[d] the procedural form of democracy long associated with the “West” in order to defend the nation itself.’ Stephen Hanson: »Defining democratic consolidation.« In Anderson, Richard D./M.

neighbouring countries of Denmark and Sweden have played an important role as parts of a more global outside pressure on the two democratising states.

At the same time, the idea of democracy has had less impact on the indigenous value systems. While Latvian and Lithuanian histories have much in common, just as the Nordic countries share a great deal of historical and cultural heritage, the Baltic / Nordic historical divide remains rather deep. Nordic countries have been reluctant to fully accept Latvia and Lithuania as part of their cultural and political community. As the Nordic Council of Ministers admits in a recent report: ‘no-one seems to consider a merger feasible, for the simple reason that it would be too difficult for the Nordics to accept the Balts... The Nordics would be quick to point out that the Nordic institutions are not only regional, but historical and cultural entities, and that adding new members would water them down.’³¹ Despite the consistent effort to advance Nordic-style democracy in both Baltic states, the abovementioned intention ‘to widen the community of shared values’ has not been fulfilled.³²

Even after more than a decade of region-building, there is little evidence of a ‘rich’, Nordic-style democracy taking root in either Baltic country. The dissemination and adoption of the idea of democracy has been a complicated process; mobile ideas have met a powerful contender and counterinfluence in the indigenous political cultures and value systems. Instead of being a story of the triumphant march of democratic ideals, the Baltic Sea region seems to offer a tale of two democracies. One is a cultural value and an identity, another – an institutionally embedded way of organising the political system, transformed and acculturated in political cultures that are ambivalent and often hostile to democracy.

Steven Fish/ Stephen E. Hanson/Philip G. Roeder (eds.): *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy*. Oxford: Princeton University Press 2001, p. 147.

³¹ *Evaluation of the Nordic Council of Ministers’ activities in the Adjacent Areas* (<http://www.norden.org/naromraaden/uk/naer-m-app.pdf> [9 July 2004]), p. 19-20.

³² A manifest symbol, as well as a cause, of the impeded travel of ‘rich’ ideas across the Baltic Sea is the persisting watershed between the Nordic and the Baltic media spaces. A Danish newspaper will often reprint or report the content of an article published in a Norwegian or Swedish newspaper, but not of one published in a Latvian newspaper; the Latvian news portal delfi.lv offers a special section on the events in the neighbouring countries of Estonia and Lithuania, but not nearly as much on events in the Nordic countries. The two media spaces rarely overlap.

Both perspectives on ideational change described above are relevant for describing the processes of mobility of the idea of democracy in the Baltic Sea region. Democracy as a general technological idea may *have* travelled and taken root in the Baltic societies, due, *among other things*, to outside pressures to implement democracy. Democracy as a culturally rooted value is a different story: value change remains an indigenous, path-determined process. Ideational mobility, *therefore*, does not just mean that an idea becomes available. In order to be ‘mobile’, an idea such as *that* of democracy also needs to become accepted, used, and culturally embedded so that, at some point, it ceases to be ‘foreign’. *Hence* the question about ‘how ideas travel’ *becomes* two questions: ‘How do ideas move?’ and, subsequently, ‘How do *they become* rooted / culturally embedded?’ Ideas *are not just* interpreted through cultures, but are *also* subordinated instruments of the indigenous cultural process. Accordingly, although regional dynamics are a very important factor in the democratisation processes,³³ the two cases considered here suggest that the way societies use ideas in the process of democratisation is better understood as generated by *structural* pressures from outside, rather than by separate *ideational* dynamics on the regional level, and that the outcomes of all these outside influences largely depend of the indigenous cultural settings.

Conclusion: A tale of two democracies?

The metaphor of two democracies can also be used to describe the two radically divergent breeds of democracy emerging in the Baltic Sea region. The idea of deliberative, ‘rich’ democracy travels, but remains in the air. The democratic transformation in the Baltics has succeeded, but the cultural transformation is *only* just beginning. *Yet it is not merely the inevitable gap between ideals and reality to which we need to pay attention, but also the*

³³ This point seems too obvious to be discussed here. It is hardly possible to discount the influence *either* of bilateral relationships in the Baltic Sea region for the last 15 years *or of such* multiple networks of cooperation as CBSS, joint Nordic and Baltic Council activities etc. Perhaps the most significant factor *in* such regional influence is the active support *of* the Nordic countries *for* Latvian and Lithuanian accession to *the* EU and NATO.

difference of ideals. It may well be that people on the opposite shores of the Baltic Sea do not just live in different realities, but also have different ideals and visions.

The issue becomes ‘*What democracy?*’ In one region, two rather distinct breeds of democracy coexist: a Nordic-style democracy, which is deliberative, radical, participationist, supported by a civic society, and integrated in the national identity; and a post-communist democracy ‘light’, which is elitist, minimal, and on the verge of becoming something else.

This observation regarding the Baltic Sea region relates to the broader context of recent democratisation thinking. Just as there is a variety of non-democracies,³⁴ so we can speak of various types of democracy. The issue of the sustainability of democracy is increasingly linked to its quality. Not all democracies are of good quality, and not all of them are capable of reproducing themselves in the long run. As Adam Przeworski puts it, ‘the quality of democracy ... does matter for its very survival.’³⁵ Coming, paradoxically, from a democratic minimalist, this indicates that the ‘lightness’ of the Baltic democracies as reflected in their political cultures should not just be a topic of academic discussion, but also a matter of political concern.

³⁴ See the recent discussion by Thomas Carothers: »The End of the Transition Paradigm.« In: *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002:1), pp. 5-21, as well as other contributors to the same volume.

³⁵ Adam Przeworski: »Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defence.« In: Ian Shapiro/ Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.): *Democracy's Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, p. 50.