

LELDE LUIK

Re-evaluating the Role of
Representative Institutions
in Radical Democratic Theory:
Lessons from Democratic Identity
Construction in Latvia



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Introduction

In the scholarly literature, ‘the crisis of democracy’ has become a ubiquitous problem whose relevance has only increased in recent years. Research on the decline of trust in traditional representative institutions and political participation has sought possible remedies to this situation (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011; Mair 2013). More recently, in connection with various challenges which have originated within Western liberal democracies, the question of whether democracy is still a viable regime has become more prominent, and if so, how it can compete with its alternatives (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Runciman 2018; Mounk 2018). Contemporary scholarly and public discourses have continually raised such issues as disinformation or populism, which are directly connected with the question of what democracy and democratic decision-making mean in the contemporary world. The present dissertation contributes to this debate by re-vitalizing the radical democratic perspective and analysing a specific instance of democratic discontent in Latvia. These two inquiries will be connected through a study of the role and meaning of representative institutions in democracy, via an empirical analysis of the discursive construction of national identity in Latvia, and by situating this discussion within the broader debate concerning political institutions in radical democratic theory.

Representative institutions are often identified with mechanisms and practices which were established at the advent of liberalism and the modern Western state. In its traditional version, the system is based on the ‘chain of representation’, where political representatives who come to power through periodic elections as a form of institutionalized competition are authorized to act on behalf of citizens and to bring their interests and preferences to the process of policy making (Rohrschneider and Thomassen 2020, 2). In this dissertation, I aim to advance an ontologically based conception of representative institutions that would embody the structural condition of democracy, namely, the lack of a definite foundation for political order. In other words, the ontological dimension is defined by the absence of any obvious objects and subjects: both objectivity and subjectivity arise in the process of representation (Marchart 2007; Thomassen 2017). Politics acquires ontological meaning because it becomes a focal point in which society continuously (re)creates an understanding of itself (Lefort 1988; Ankersmit 2002; Laclau 2005). The ontological conception of representative institutions has been most prominently articulated by French political theorist Claude Lefort in his work on the emergence of democracy as a historically specific form of power – the ‘empty place’ at the heart of a political regime (Lefort 1988). As Lefort writes in his essay ‘The Question of Democracy’, the ‘emptiness’ of power in a democracy refers to an intricate state where ‘the people’ as the sovereign can never achieve the finite image of itself – a condition that precludes arbitrary attempts to create totalizing systems in the name of ‘the people’ (Lefort 1988). Representative institutions are the key element for maintaining this condition since they both entail a form of embodying the people and thwart any final closure of

meaning, thus providing a mechanism through which the intricacy of the ‘empty place’ of power can be realised.

In radical democratic theory, however, representative institutions have not received significant attention and when discussed, have often been explicitly criticised. Radical democracy has been defined by its critique of liberal democracy, the latter of which is argued to be dominated by economic interests and which has lost its ability to achieve the goals of equality and justice (Trend 1996; Little and Lloyd 2008). Radical democracy has also been defined by deconstructivist and post-foundationalist perspectives that emphasize the absence of determinate and transcendental categories for political and social life (Norval 2003; Thomassen 2013). Both directions have grounded an ethos that argues for the transformative change of the current neoliberal order through processes of political subjectification (Tambakaki 2019). Despite connections between the ontological approach to politics and radical democracy, since representative institutions are often assumed to be inseparable from liberalism, they often get lost in the conflictual or dismissive response towards liberal theory and liberal democracy (Bennett 2004). Though representative institutions have been historically linked with liberal democracy, scholars have yet to fully tap the potential of their theoretical examination as ontologically situated and thus as distinct from liberalism. I argue that such analysis is vital in imagining alternative modes of democracy that incorporate the critique of (neo)liberalism but which is also sensitive to the critique that radical democracy is insufficiently normative.

One of the key normative dimensions concerning representative institutions is associated with the agency of the democratic sovereign. As Margaret Canovan has asked – who are ‘the people’, and how do they appear on the political stage (Canovan 2005)? In a democratic setting, what is the relationship between ‘the people’ and political representation? In this dissertation, I describe the ‘representative turn’ in democratic theory which has argued in favour of the intrinsic role of representation in democracy, and stands opposed to the long-standing debate about the inherent contradiction between the two. Yet, representation theorists have faced an important question concerning the relationship between ‘the people’ and political leaders, who arguably mobilize and construct collective identities. If everything is a result of representation, so to speak, how can one define specifically democratic features of political identity construction and mobilization (Fossen 2019; Wolkenstein 2021)? Such a criticism has especially been directed towards radical democrats and post-foundationalists, who have explicitly rejected universalistic norms.

In addressing the topic of normativity in post-foundational thought, I will focus on one of the best-known radical democratic frameworks for collective identity construction – Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theory of hegemony, antagonism and political identity construction (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and Laclau’s work on populism as the democratic political strategy (Laclau 2005). Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework has received a fair share of criticism for its ‘decisionism’ and lack of a clearly normative democratic dimension (Urbinati 2019; Rummens 2009). The broader theoretical framework which Laclau and

Mouffe establish situates the concept of hegemony as the central mechanism of constructing and contesting social order, thereby insisting that, in the absence of determinate foundations, forming an order is a political act. Arguably, what some have described as a more general social ontology, according to which the political stands at the very centre of constituting social being (Critchley and Marchart 2004; Marchart 2022), does little to distinguish between democratic and undemocratic acts of political identity construction.

While Laclau's post-foundationalist ethos has been argued to address these accusations of normative deficit (Marchart 2019), in this dissertation, I argue that his post-foundationalist reading of democratic identity construction does not fully address Laclau's normative limitations – as illustrated by his account of representative institutions. Much of what Laclau has developed concerning democratic subjectivity and the notion of 'the people' specifically within this framework can be found in his book *On Populist Reason*. In this work, the democratic subject is situated in such a way as to challenge the existing liberal hegemonic order, of which Laclau is critical and which generally includes the representative system. Laclau undeniably posits 'the people' as a central concept of democracy, and the main signifier for challenging hegemonic order upon which he builds his theory of populism (Laclau 2005). For him, representative institutions appear to be 'part of the problem' – they are inherently associated with the dominant political system that seeks to appropriate political demands in a way that forecloses any extension of equality.

Laclau's view on institutions also draws on what Chantal Mouffe has defined as the 'democratic paradox' (Mouffe 2009), where democracy is characterized by the tension between popular sovereignty and individual rights, with institutions being situated on one side or another in the struggle for hegemony. In contrast to this view, I argue that post-foundational ethics of radical democracy should pay more attention to Claude Lefort's concept of power and the role he attributes to representative institutions. As will be explained in the course of this dissertation, this role has been underemphasized in the general perspective of radical democratic theory due to its deep-seated critique of liberal democracy. However, following Lefort, liberal democracy does not have equal representative institutions that take an ontological position in Lefort's post-foundationalist conception of democracy. This position has been described as the 'third place' (Flynn 2019) of power in a political regime. One of Lefort's key insights is that this place of power in democracy is symbolized – but not taken – by representative institutions. This 'third place', identified neither with the 'rulers' nor the 'ruled', offers a different framework for the post-foundational theorizing of democracy, and one that provides a contrast to Laclau and Mouffe's notion of hegemonic struggle over the place of power.

In this dissertation, I address the view on representative institutions in radical democratic theory by employing an empirical analysis of Latvia and the relation constructed between democracy and representative institutions in this context. Latvia belongs to the group of countries in Eastern Europe that exhibit low levels of political trust as well as limited civic and political participation. Since the early

1900s, citizens' trust in Latvian parliament has not exceeded 20%. Theorists have mainly approached the question of democratic discontents in Eastern Europe as an issue of learning the liberal democratic culture or failing to do so (Luik 2022). Post-communist contexts such as Latvia are often analysed from the perspective of undergoing a democratic transition. Recently, this view has changed from being based on institutionally orientated criteria back to historical and social influences (Krastev 2017). In this dissertation, I provide a critical examination of the assumptions that have guided the dominant paradigm of democracy studies in the region and question the value of the explanations it provides for political alienation and mistrust in Eastern Europe, contending that radical democratic theory has not been fully applied to historical contexts such as Latvia. However, the goal of the thesis is not merely to apply more critical perspectives to Latvia but to use this case study to address the broader theoretical question of the role of representative institutions in radical democratic theory.

The dissertation takes a long-*durée* analysis of the construction of Latvian national identity starting from the 19th-century first nationalist movement to the contemporary debates about COVID-19 restrictions, which draws upon original discourse analysis covering the period from 1988 to 2021 and on secondary sources. The central question of the empirical analysis concerns the self-representation of 'the people', 'state' and 'democracy' and the representative institutions associated with these notions such as the parliament, government, political parties, and other related notions that can be deduced from the discourse analysis, both in their interrelation and the evolution of this dynamic over time. The discourse analysis shows how 'the people' has been continually constructed as a pre-given, organic unity and how this has clashed with the idea of democracy, which has been portrayed as a signpost of recognition from the West, especially in recent history. Especially after the fall of the Soviet Union and the reclaiming of independence, this relation has meant the pursuit of a productive relationship between prevailing conceptions of the unity of the nation and the plurality of democracy. While, on the one hand, democracy in terms of the traditional representative system has been portrayed as 'European' and 'Western', it has also been prominently associated with citizens' direct participation, such as through referendums and signature collections, exemplifying the expression of the common will of 'the people'. Political discourse in Latvia has effectively brought these two conceptions of democracy into conflict, by continually opposing the unity of the nation against representative institutions, as indicated by extremely critical attitudes towards politicians and political parties.

Thus, while the system of representative government has been linked with 'Europeanness', which is viewed positively, and 'democracy', which has been identified predominantly with the unmediated actions of 'the people', the actual political institutions and, more prominently, political parties are identified with greed, corruption and selfish interests. As shown by the discourse analysis, these representations exist on a structural level and help one to understand why, despite the key references to unity and homogeneity that are fruitful for populist political forces, there has yet to be a substantial populist success story in Latvia. As my

analysis reveals, the absence of links between political actors and the discourse on democracy underlines the fact that while political parties articulate political subjectivities, they do not claim to embody them. Thus, the organic unity of ‘the people’ remains ‘undisturbed’ as the idealization of ‘the people’s’ direct presence in politics, which from the radical perspectives employed here is an impossible task.

Organic unity is present in Ernesto Laclau’s radical democratic analysis of Eastern European populism. For him, ‘the people’ is the key discursive signifier through which a wedge can be drawn in an unequal political context to summon new alliances and to achieve transformative political change. In Eastern Europe, however, the antagonistic frontier is drawn *outside* of the community instead of *internally* and overwhelmingly demarcates the nation and its ethnic outsiders (Laclau 2005, 192). Latvia provides a challenge to this insight since the low level of political trust, persistent anti-government rhetoric, and an appeal for ‘the people’ to stand against the ‘corrupted elite’ would, in the Laclauian perspective, be sure signs of a hegemonic challenge and formation of a new political identity. Furthermore, in the discourse on democracy, the ethnic ‘other’ in the form of internal minorities, which could very well be expected in the case of Latvia, basically does not appear. This does not mean that such ‘otherness’ would not exist in a broader construction of national identity – as a self-representation of power, the ethnic Latvian community is presumably taken as a given fact. The issue is that in this self-representation of power, the ‘other’ does not refer to ethnic minorities, but political representatives – who have an equal claim of embodying the sovereignty of the same ethnic Latvian community. Thus, while the constitutive frontier is indeed outside of the community, it externalizes and antagonizes representative politics in its embodiment of parliament, political parties and politicians at large. The link between ‘democracy’ and ‘the people’ is not articulated through representation, but through the assertion of the right to popular, direct participation in decision-making. Laclau’s perspective is thus insufficient for interpreting the dominant attitudes towards representative institutions in Latvia, unless it ascribes a distinctive normative role to the discursive construction of institutions themselves.

This dissertation argues that the case of Latvia underlines the role of representative institutions as an ontological condition of democracy, as seen in the Lefortian perspective. By advancing this argument, it aims to correct a bias within radical democratic theory: while radical democracy certainly includes a line of thought that affirms representative institutions, it continues to receive less attention, in contrast to the critique of representative government oriented towards liberalism. The negation of representative institutions and the rejection of representation while embracing the democratic sovereignty of ‘the people’ through the references to direct democracy in Latvia pose a theoretical question of the normative frame the representative institutions receive in radical democratic perspectives. The empirical analysis of Latvia illustrates that representative institutions have a role which transcends their identification with liberalism. Even if one views the constitution of the social order in a post-foundational way, its

articulation as democracy must include the dimension of representation that is distinct from the processes of subjectification, as defined by Laclau and Mouffe. The dissertation thus affirms and expands the Lefortian view that the representative institutes the structural level, the ‘third place’ of power, which constitutes a space in which ‘the people’ and their multiple actualities co-exist, thereby creating a productive tension between universal and particular claims – as opposed to investing one through the other as Laclau and Mouffe argue in their theory of hegemony.

Furthermore, the dissertation opens new ways of thinking about democratic transition and democracies in the post-communist context. The prevailing scholarly perspectives have often positioned democratic discontents in Eastern Europe as a distinct cultural and historical phenomenon; an analysis, which often assumes a hierarchal relation with respect to Western democracies. Radical democratic perspectives reject the view that democracy is the correct implementation of the right model in the form of an institutional framework or cultural values; a bias which underlies much of the democratization literature. Democratic politics in Eastern Europe can indeed be linked with culture and language, but to understand the role of these elements in a non-essentialist way, they have to be viewed as self-representations of identity, where the different structural elements of discourse are in continuous flux, not monolithic blocks that pre-determine political identities.

The monograph is structured as follows: the next chapter is dedicated to critically examining the existing literature on democracy studies of Eastern Europe and addressing its limitations in conceptualizing democracy and political representation. The third chapter then turns to the theoretical debates which involve discussions of representative institutions in radical democratic theory. The fourth chapter details the background of Latvian attitudes towards representative politics, establishes the main argument regarding Latvia’s case from the radical democratic perspective and describes the method of empirical research. The dissertation then turns to the historical background of national identity construction, focusing on two key periods at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries and during the re-independence movement in the late 1980s. The sixth chapter follows with the analysis of contemporary democratic identity construction, in the period from 2000 until 2021. Finally, the last chapter brings together the theoretical and empirical dimensions to establish the overall conclusions of the study.

The monograph begins with a discussion of the literature on Eastern Europe and the Baltic states in the context of political attitudes and democratic participation, and then discusses the role of normative hierarchies on democracy studies in the region. The third chapter begins with a brief introduction of the literature on the crisis of representative democracy and continues with the debate regarding the relationship between democracy and representation in political theory, and the issue of normativity in representation-centric perspectives. The discussion moves to questions of representation and normativity in the context of radical democratic theory. The chapter then positions the central theoretical argument regarding the normative dimension of representative institutions by discussing

the work by Ernesto Laclau and Claude Lefort. In chapter four, I introduce the background concerning the relationship between society and politicians in Latvia and establish how the case will be read in the context of the thesis. The chapter also describes the methodological framework employed in the dissertation which is based on discourse analysis. Chapters five and six offer a presentation of the empirical analysis and the conclusions of the dissertation. The first part of the analysis comprises two key periods of the construction of national identity: the national movement in the second part of the 19th century and the movement of breaking away from the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the second part, the analysis targets several instances of direct democracy initiatives in Latvia from the period of 2000 up to 2021, and self-representations of ‘the people’ and ‘democracy’ which were constructed in related debates. The last chapter discusses the meaning of ‘representative institutions’ in Latvia and how this term is related to dominant notions of ‘the people’ and ‘democracy’ in the context of Laclau’s argument on ethnopopulism and Lefort’s notion of the place of power in democracy. Both of these theoretical perspectives are then brought back to the broader discussion of the role of representative institutions in radical democratic theory, followed by key takeaways and an outline for further possible debate.

The broader conclusions of the dissertation contrast different conceptions of representative institutions in radical democratic theory and their relationship with liberalism in the light of empirical research. While radical democratic theory embraces both emancipation and openness, it is critical in associating them with representative institutions in many of its dominant accounts. The case of Latvia demonstrates that it is challenging to maintain emancipation and openness if the structural condition of democracy – identified with representative institutions by Lefort – is not included in the construction of political identities. Crucially, this does not mean simply affirming the role of liberal democracy, following Claude Lefort, but rather recognizing democracy as a particular historical stage of modernity and representative institutions as its key physical embodiment. This view on political institutions affirms radical democratic commitment and expands the theoretical horizon across which representative democracy can be thought.

2. Studying Democracy in Eastern Europe: Existing Research and Critical Perspectives

The aim of this chapter is to situate the empirical case study of the dissertation within a broader context of the literature in which the case has typically been discussed, as well as establish the limitations of this literature regarding democratic theorizing. This is important for two reasons: first of all, little scholarly work has been done which combines the study of Eastern Europe as its prime empirical focus, and the democratic experiences of the region specifically, with radical democratic theorizing. One of the central contributions of the dissertation will be to bring these two distinct sets of literature into closer dialogue. Therefore, the following two sections will introduce the key paradigms in democracy studies of the region, with a focus on how these perspectives have conceptualized citizens' attitudes towards their representative governments. Secondly, and in a related manner, through an analysis of the transition and democratization literature, the debate over democracy in the region proves to be considerably limited in accounting for the role of cultural and historical context in forming democratic identities. This insight forms the crux of the critical argument concerning democracy studies of the region that will be presented in this chapter.

As the present chapter will show, democratization and transition approaches have few theoretical resources at their disposal for explaining current negative perceptions of democratic institutions in the region, a phenomenon exemplified by indicators such as low levels of trust towards institutions and low political participation. The procedural view of democracy has predominated, often at the expense of constitutive perspectives on the formation of political identity formation, thereby offering too few frameworks for analysing democracy beyond issues of institutional consolidation. Meanwhile, the determinism which is characteristic of cultural explanations in the transition paradigm has only reified the notion that the inherent 'illiberalism' of Eastern Europeans is the sole analytical explanation of democratic discontents in the region. Since the appearance of the transition paradigm and perhaps even earlier, as demonstrated by the work of Larry Wolff (Wolff 1994), the literature has been defined by an asymmetry in characterizing the Western European 'Self' as the mature, progressive party in quasi-opposition to the yet immature, backward Eastern European 'Other'. These deep-seated discursive structures, I argue, are still reproduced in democracy studies on Eastern Europe (Luik 2022). Past and present studies on political culture are hampered by this limitation, as they tend to reproduce the idea that democracy is a learning curve, with implication that the East is inferior vis-à-vis the West.

Radical democracy fundamentally rejects such conceptualizations of democracy that identify it as a correct implementation of some procedure that is known in advance and uniformly across countries. In this regard, the theoretical and empirical potential of constructivist perspectives on political identity formation are underutilized with respect to understanding Eastern European democracies (Luik 2022). However, there is an important debate in the scholarship concerning

the disagreements between different approaches that are embedded in the constructivist perspective, which will be the focus of the next chapter. For the present chapter, the goal will be to identify the important deficiencies in the literature on Eastern Europe concerning democratic identity formation. Such deficiencies clearly demand more theoretically diverse research on political identity construction in the region, and an application of more nuanced theorizations of democracy.

2.1. Democratization and ‘Democratic Backsliding’

The academic discussion concerning the low political support for democracy in Eastern Europe has mostly taken place in the confines of democratization studies, which have focused on the various determinants of democratic stability in the comparative perspective (Hibbing and Patterson 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996; Lovell 2001). While the question about the consolidation of Eastern European democracies seemed to fade from the scholarly agenda amidst the integration of Eastern European countries with the European Union and other Western structures (Berglund 2013), by 2007, accounts that called into question the seemingly successful democratic transition already were already beginning to appear (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007; Krastev 2007; Rupnik 2007). With the rise of populist and nationalist political parties, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and harsh anti-immigration policy in countries such as Hungary and Poland, but also in Slovakia, Croatia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere, the democratization literature began to question the completeness of the post-communist transition.

One of the central points of contention in this debate concerns the criteria for actually assessing democratic consolidation. From the beginning, democratization scholars have yet to establish the measures which would indicate a complete democratic transformation. Two different approaches can be identified along procedural-minimum and cultural-historical lines, of which the former was more prominent at the inception of transition studies, whereas attention to the latter has increased with so-called ‘democratic backsliding’. The procedural minimum approach defines consolidation as an institutional entrenchment of democratic politics through free elections, party competition, and basic freedoms regarding the press and civil society. It has been one of the most influential perspectives in democratization literature, and, especially at the beginning of the transition, is known for establishing institutional criteria that are hard to meet. Eastern Europe was perceived as lacking fundamental grounds for democratic regime formation and stability: it had to undergo three so-called transitions by establishing a new economic system, a new political system and constitution, and, often, to define its *demos*, i.e., to engage in nation-building (Merkel 2008). These transitions, especially with the added pressure of time, could pose serious problems for rooting stable and democratic competition between different actors. The fact of ‘democ-

racy becoming the only game in town' was thus the key factor for assessing regime consolidation.

However, the stringent criteria of procedural-minimum accounts did not mean that they disregarded cultural elements from their analysis. In their definition of consolidated democracy, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan included 'a normatively positive appreciation of those core institutions of a democratic political society – political parties, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, interparty alliances, and legislatures – by which society constitutes itself politically to select and monitor democratic government' (Linz and Stepan 1996, 8). Among the most promising candidates for successful democratization – Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, Linz and Stepan also found an 'imbalanced' relation between the emerging political class and civil societies. Their point was that while the civic society had played a massive role in regime transformation in those countries, especially in Poland and Czechia, their senses of moral purpose became opposed to their respective interest-based political societies (Linz and Stepan 1996). The lack of self-association with political parties in Poland and the cynical attitude towards politics in Czechia were reflected in surveys about support for political institutions in these countries. Meanwhile, in Hungary, civic society fully gave way to political society, diminishing the role of public organizations in the political arena, in such a way as to provide a positive counterexample to Poland and Czechia (Linz and Stepan 1996). Linz and Stepan were apprehensive about the state-society relation in Central Europe, but they ultimately did not afford it with decisive importance.

While Linz and Stepan didn't delve into the details of the relationship between government and society, other, more sociologically-orientated studies have, particularly those which explored the sources of political trust, as discussed in section 3.2 of this thesis. One of the initial expectations among researchers was that improving and stabilising economic conditions would increase citizens' trust and confidence in the new democratic political institutions (Hibbing and Patterson 1994). Indeed, most citizens in the new post-communist democracies took a sceptical, wait-and-see attitude toward the state rather than being irrevocably distrustful of politics (Mishler and Rose 1997). However, trust in core political institutions – parliament, government, and political parties – remained low in the region despite economic growth. In this regard, many studies sought the role of historical legacies and societal values.

Persistently low levels of political trust were attributed to the disastrous effects of the one-party system on understanding the role of political parties and political participation, with everyday life being depoliticized and opposed to the tainted, uncivil reality of politics (Ceka 2012). The lack of political pluralism compelled citizen participation in political and civic institutions as a matter of pretence, making post-communist societies distrustful and cynical about the role of political institutions and civic organizations (Mishler and Rose 1997). The basic argument about the experience of the communist political system was that 'it had the effect of destroying trust between people and government and between people themselves' (Lovell 2001, 33). Another issue was the lack of political continuity

and thus of stable party constituencies, resulting in volatility of political sympathies and affiliations: people more often know the party they do not want to vote for instead of the one they do and have proven to switch their political allegiances rather swiftly (Rose 2009). The levels of political distrust implied that when people vote, they do not express a deep commitment to the party for whom they vote (Rose 2009). In his famous study on post-materialist values and democracy, Ronald Inglehart argued that Central and Eastern Europe, though similar in religious terms to Western Europe, generally place considerably lower value on self-expression – ‘a syndrome of tolerance, trust, well-being, and emphasis on self-expression that is closely linked with democracy’ (Inglehart 2006, 67). His thesis implied, however, that once post-communist societies catch up with the West in terms of post-material values, the levels of political trust will increase and stabilize.

However, cultural and sociological analysis was afforded a secondary role to the institutional consolidation, which was the key requirement for accession to the European Union. Researchers have acknowledged the issues of low trust in institutions, cynicism towards politics, voters’ volatility, and the lack of connection between political organizations and society, but in accordance with the dominant post-materialist thesis, these factors were expected to disappear over time with further economic growth. EU membership was seen as the crucial driving force for democratization, the influence of which many argued would not disappear after the accession (Levitz, Pop-Eleches 2010). The success of Central and Eastern Europe was opposed to countries that were part of the Soviet Union which had pivoted to becoming non-democratic regimes, except for the Baltic states. The transition paradigm was seen as being too pessimistic with respect to Central and Eastern Europe, to the extent that it ignored important historical and cultural differences between the countries of the former communist bloc (Merkel 2008). The marked differences in transition between countries that were collectively defined as ‘post-communist’ led scholars to incorporate more of the cultural dimension into their analysis – this time to distinguish Eastern Europe and other countries of the former Soviet Union. In the light of the democratic stability of Central and Eastern Europe, sociological perspectives were used to highlight the division between CEE and less democratically successful regimes of other post-communist countries (Ekiert 2015). This line of argument echoed the overall approach to cultural explanations in the transition paradigm – their significance (re)appeared only when something was deemed to be unexpectedly positive or negative in the process of democratic consolidation.

Thus, the cultural-historical dimension re-emerged by opposing the depth of liberal democratic tradition in Eastern and Western Europe. From 2007 onwards, a debate arose concerning ‘democratic backsliding’ in Eastern Europe, due to the rise of populist right-wing parties in Hungary and Poland, as well as in Slovakia, Croatia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere. In a special issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, several authors expressed the view that radicalization in Eastern Europe is part of the broader European pattern of the rise of populism and the radical right, except that the particular experiences of transition have

made these trends more prominent (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007; Krastev 2007; Rupnik 2007). Both Ivan Krastev and Jacques Rupnik pointed out the two-sided role of democratization and Europeanization, which, on the one hand, developed robust institutions and a free-market economy, but, on the other hand, drew on elite-led, technocratic political control, passive civil society, and stifled political debate (Krastev 2007; Rupnik 2007). The type of politics that characterized the transition period did little to connect the public with the ruling political parties, and this vacuum of legitimacy was later utilized by populists. Yet, over time, these developments in Eastern Europe were seen to fundamentally challenge the perceived success of democratization. Hungary especially had been one of the shining examples of successful democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe. In the early democratization accounts, its chances for successful democratic consolidation had been assessed as the highest among the post-communist states (Linz, Stephan 1996). Yet now, Hungary has had the most serious backtracking with respect to constitutional norms of democracy, thereby raising doubts about the value of previous modes of assessing democratization (Herman 2016). Little in the democratization literature anticipated Hungary's reversal of democratic norms (Bogaards 2018). Earlier democratization literature has been criticized for focusing too much on the institutional dimension of democratic consolidation (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018; Bogaards 2018), and on the few criteria that made up 'formal democracy' instead of evaluating whether countries of Eastern Europe had become 'substantive democracies' (Ágh 2016, 9). The quest to explain what facilitates a democratic regime's lasting in the long term was now directed beyond the procedural minimum model.

The 'democratic backsliding' perspective presumed more varied criteria for assessing democratic consolidation and [re]introducing cultural/historical variables into the analysis. From this perspective, the political support to institutions and citizens' ties with political actors was afforded a much greater role than in earlier views. Lise Esther Herman argues that by relying on the regulative role of institutions, dominant scholarly perspectives saw party-citizen relations as an important but not essential element of democratic consolidation (Herman 2016). Western-centric approaches underestimated the speed with which a robust civil society would develop in Eastern Europe, as it had developed in Western Europe over the course of a much longer historical period (Ágh 2016). In the elite-driven transition processes, indications of citizens' detachment from parties were viewed as something that further democratic progress would overcome. In trying to assess what had caused the demise of democratic institutions, researchers thus began focusing on the categories of political support and the engagement of civil society. Analysing democracy in Eastern Europe required that scholars take into account Easton's category of 'diffuse support' for democratic values that existed in society and among elites (Herman 2016, 267). Over time, social, historical, and cultural dimensions became increasingly emphasized in democracy studies of Eastern Europe, such as the role of informal rules and practices (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013), corruptive political networks (Dimitrova 2018), the lack of liberal-democratic tradition (Dawson and Hanley 2016), and different semantic

constructions of political concepts (Herman 2016). Especially after the migration crisis in 2015 and the introduction of migrant quotas, the question about the fundamental difference of Eastern European political culture returned to the scholarly debate. The reasons were found in the culture and language-oriented definitions of nationhood and, in a related manner, suspicions towards universalistic ideologies and insecurity about national survival (Krastev 2017; 2018; Rupnik 2016).

To summarise, for years, scholars of Eastern Europe have been concerned with the assessment and the results of democratic consolidation, but the role ascribed to cultural and historical factors in this process has been ambiguous. From the transition perspective, the key criteria of becoming a democracy responded to the procedural model of democracy – the adoption of key institutions and norms. If negative attitudes towards politics and low levels of civic participation were detected in Eastern Europe, they were expected to transform over time. In the immediate period of institution-building and following the relatively successful completion of this process, the relationship between the state and society was left in the background. However, once indications of the crumbling formal institutions began to appear, explanations were sought in the cultural differences between Eastern and Western Europe. Few other models of democracy were applied to the region, and those that were didn't afford much significance to the constitutive dimensions of political identity formation. Thus, the analytical frameworks that included culture and history as relevant factors for explaining democratization, explicitly or implicitly drew on a deterministic contrast between more and less mature political cultures.

Scholars have advanced two main lines of reasoning for explaining democratic discontents in the region. Firstly, they have argued that democratic discontents have stemmed from a failure to create a political system that would substantially engage ordinary citizens, and that would be based on strong ties between citizens and political parties. As a related development, the weak citizen-politician ties have been seen as leaving democratic systems vulnerable to being exploited by narrow economic interest groups, with the main fault being assigned to the post-communist political class. By contrast, some have pointed out the incongruencies between civic society and politicians in the early transition period. Secondly, scholars have afforded a significant role to the (lack of) historical traditions and societal values that would predispose Eastern Europeans to be better democrats. This point specifically concerns the notion that liberal democratic norms like individual rights, diversity, and a plurality conflict with the (national) majority's perceptions of fairness. Populist and nationalist mobilization can and do increase civic participation and activism, but these developments are seen to take place at the expense of democracy.

The overall picture that emerges from the analysis of support for democracy in Eastern Europe is not particularly inspiring. On the one hand, the argument is that corrupt, technocratic, or otherwise problematic political elites can be challenged by new and genuine grassroots activism, leading the way to 're-democratization' (Krastev 2007; Dimitrova 2018; Ágh 2016). On the other hand, the

analysis of Eastern European societies continually reveals a set of values and attitudes that clash with Western conceptions of democratic culture. Thus, the expectation that Eastern European countries will finally arrive at better democracies seems to lack a substantial ground. Instead, political realities only seem to attest to the inherently illiberal character of Eastern Europeans. This argument will be further explored in the section about Orientalism in the democratization literature. But before that, it is necessary to examine accounts of democratic attitudes in the Baltic states and, more specifically, Latvia.

2.2. Democratization and Political Support in the Baltic States

In their work on democratic consolidation, Linz and Stepan paid special attention to the relationship between nation-building and state-building, with Latvia, together with Estonia, being one of their primary case studies. The premise of their study was that a preference for nation- over the state-building hampers consolidation – however, this was precisely the direction that both Baltic states pursued (Linz and Stepan 1996). Latvia's and Estonia's respective nationalizing policies aimed to increase cultural homogeneity, but these ultimately contradicted the democratic policies that promoted the equality of all citizens (Linz and Stepan 1996). From this viewpoint, Lithuania, which had a greater degree of national homogeneity and non-exclusive citizenship policy, was poised to be in a much better position (Linz and Stepan 1996).

Yet, under the assumption that political support is an indicator of democratic consolidation, trust in public institutions has continually been the lowest in Lithuania, and the highest in Estonia (Pettai, Auers and Ramonaitė 2011). This would not mean that nationalism, attitudes towards ethnic minorities and the quality of democracy are unrelated – indeed, many studies have been dedicated to precisely this issue in the case of the Baltic states (Agarin 2011; Cianetti 2019; Dambrauskas 2017). Though identification with the political community is dominantly ethnic, economic and institutional performance appears to be a greater determining factor for all population groups with respect to their support for the political system and trust in institutions (Ehin 2007). In the Baltic states, better economic and political performance has correlated with higher political trust, even more so than socializing factors such as interpersonal trust (Lühiste 2006; 2008). This has been used to explain differences in the disparities in political support between Estonia, on the one hand, and Latvia and Lithuania, on the other. Scholars have noted that extensive reforms of the civil service and the judiciary in Estonia at the very start of the transition increased citizens' trust in political institutions (Gudzinskas 2017; Ehin 2007). These reforms are viewed as a crucial factor in lowering levels of corruption, and decreasing the role of informal economic networks in politics, as opposed to the cases of Lithuania and, especially, Latvia. In Latvia, citizens' level of political participation and activism is most

significantly associated with their perception of the performance and responsiveness of institutions (Mieriņa 2012). Overall, in contrast to the initial sceptical expectations regarding the role of ethnic tensions on democratic consolidation, one could argue that the more decisive factors are economic and institutional performance. This conclusion corresponded to the general trend in transition studies, which placed institutional consolidation over any other criteria of progress with respect to democratization.

However, the issue of citizens' alienation from political institutions in the Baltic states has not disappeared from the scholarly agenda, and has continued to focus on the quality of institutional consolidation. In addition to political corruption, the actual functioning of the political system itself can be seen as affecting levels of political support. In Latvia and Lithuania, the party system is more volatile and fragmented than in Estonia, resulting in a more significant turnover of ruling parties and decreasing trust in political institutions. More populist and personality-orientated politics do little to stabilize ideological grouping around certain issues (Duvold 2014). This instability and the lack of long-term ties between voters and parties are seen as contributing to the low levels of political trust and altogether withdrawal from politics and political participation (Duvold 2014). The term 'vicious circle' is often used to describe political attitudes in Latvia and Lithuania (Lühiste 2006; Pettai, Auers and Ramonaitė 2011; Mieriņa 2012), in order to refer to the mutual distrust between citizens and politicians that makes it very difficult to generate political alternatives to the status quo. Overall, this alienation between citizens and politicians is believed to seriously challenge the legitimacy of the democratic regime as such. The main solutions offered in this regard is the increase of the stability of the political system (Lühiste 2008), increase economic equality that would increase interpersonal trust and social capital (Lühiste 2006) as well as fight corruption and raise the education level of citizens (Mieriņa 2012).

Nevertheless, some evidence contradicts the straightforward explanation regarding the sources of political support in the Baltic states. In terms of economic performance, while Estonia has continually had higher levels of GDP, in Latvia and Lithuania, economic growth has actually been linked with a decreased level of trust in institutions (Pettai, Auers and Ramonaitė 2011). Support for a single leader who is not bound by parliament and parties has been strong in the Baltic states, even though it has decreased over time and is found to be higher among non-titular ethnic groups (Ehin 2007; Lühiste 2008; Pettai, Auers and Ramonaitė 2011). The ethnic gap has been significant in most dimensions of political support (Ehin 2007), and as some have argued, even plays the key role in structuring party politics in Latvia and Lithuania, while in Estonia, the link between ethnicity and trust in institutions was mostly experienced in 1990s (Gudžinskas 2017). This has compelled the need to re-introduce cultural and historical dimensions to the analysis of democratic consolidation in the Baltics.

Some have sought to explain Estonian 'exceptionalism' by its more pronounced Protestant values, which have helped it to better embrace liberal democracy. In Lithuania, political trust and institutions are associated with strong leadership (Gudžinskas 2017). In this constellation, Latvians 'take the middle

ground' (Mattusch 1997 quoted in Gudzinškas 2017, 24), as they embrace a mixture of both paternalism and individualism. Yet, a more significant topic concerning the cultural dimension is that of nationalism and ethnic pride, which arguably is reflected in all Baltic societies equally. Though some scholars have challenged the link that some transitologists, such as Linz and Stepan, have established between democratic consolidation and with explanations based on institutional and economic performance, their point about the conflicting logics of nationalization and democratic policies remains relevant. Latvia and Estonia have been called ethnic democracies, therein highlighting their formal policies of exclusion on the basis of citizenship, while large groups of 'aliens' or 'non-citizens', primarily Russian-speaking non-naturalized residents, immigrated there during the Soviet period. Kjetil Duvold has argued that neither Estonia nor Latvia have exhibited any willingness to envision a state model that would go beyond the nationalizing perspective, to pursue a policy of 'power-sharing' with ethnic minorities (Duvold 2014, 68). The question arises, then, as to whether support for a democratic regime in Baltic states would survive any serious challenge to the ethnocultural conception of the state. One case in point is the electoral success of the populist radical-right Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE), which is defined by its staunch nativism, anti-establishment rhetoric, and Euro-scepticism. The rise of EKRE has been linked with their anti-refugee statements during the migration quota debate in the EU, which they presented as a matter of national survival (Braghiroli and Petsinis 2019). These conclusions have shown that in contrast to previous explanations of the effects of the political system on citizens' perception of democracy, the role of political culture and cultural attitudes of Baltic citizens have started to play a greater role in studies of their democracies. So, while nationalism has undoubtedly been present in studies about the Baltic states due to their contentious policies regarding ethnic minorities, specifically in the case of Latvia and Estonia, the question about the relationship between nationalism and democratization has become more pronounced over time.

Thus, researchers have begun to direct their attention toward Latvian political parties' role in continually constructing and actualizing ethnicity-based narratives. In the homogeneous but volatile Latvian party landscape, it is politically costly for parties to pursue minority-friendly positions as competing parties use this as an opportunity to mobilize support on an ethnic basis, a factor which is almost absent in Estonia (Nakai 2014). Some have argued that parties avoid more inclusive positions not because they harbour a genuinely ethnic-nationalist sentiment, but because they can simply use it as a political tactic (Nakai 2014). However, while this argument points to pragmatic rather than ethno-nationalist tendencies of the Latvian political parties, it says little about more general public perceptions. This discussion brings us to a broader historical argument about the differences in ties between citizens and the state in Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, parties grew as organizations with the aim of increasing mass emancipation, while in the post-communist case, parties had to create their platforms without much time to build grassroots organizations (Mair 1997 quoted in Aylott 2014, 4–5). Baltic political parties are generally created in a top-down manner

and with few roots in civil society – though the societies are argued to potentially value competence over participation (Duvold 2014). For instance, in Latvia, the political class is sceptical and pessimistic about the ability to engage voters due to their ‘low level of political education and understanding’ (Berzina 2016, 212) by contrast to Western societies.

Overall, the picture that emerges regarding support for democracy in the Baltics is two-fold. On the one hand, one could say that the most obvious factors – satisfaction with economic and regime performance – contribute to higher political support. At the same time, however, they only really explain the case of Estonia, which, meanwhile, has arguably the most powerful illiberal political force in the Baltics. While the fragmented political systems and corruption scandals have precipitated negative trends in Latvia and Lithuania, neither the existing conceptualizations of consolidation nor empirical comparison with other countries about the scale of these deficiencies would mean affording these criteria the uppermost significance in assessing political support. So, on the other hand, one could attribute support for democracy to cultural and historical differences between the Baltic states themselves, and between Eastern and Western Europe generally. Similarly, as can be seen in the broader democratization literature, once institutional consolidation explanations appear to reach their limit, cultural and historical factors start to be seen as playing a role. Indeed, the reasons for the low support for key democratic institutions remain hidden – or are phrased in terms of culture and history, a ‘deep-seated feature’ (Duvold 2014) of these societies. Thus, while cultural and historical contexts are very important factors to consider when analysing democratic discontents, how these factors are conceptualized remains an important question. At the end of the day, the key argument that emerges about the Baltics is that democracy inevitably clashes with the nationalism that permeates all three countries. Pluralism, diversity, and a non-nationalizing state cannot but conflict with these states’ mono-cultural, homogenous, and paternalistic conceptions. This determinism in cultural explanations underlies a great deal of the analysis of democracy in the Baltic states, much as it does in the case of Eastern Europe. To understand the sources of these deterministic theories, it is necessary to take a critical look on the power dynamic between the constructions of ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ Europe’s respective identities and to do so by drawing on the postcolonial perspective.

2.3. Critical Perspectives on Democratization

The teleological premises of progress and modernization in the post-communist transition and in Eastern European studies have been subject to a strain of criticism. Some scholars have argued that most academic and public discourse concerning Eastern Europe has without hesitation adopted the perspective of Western Europe as an example to which Eastern European societies must ‘catch up’ to and model themselves after (Kuus 2004; Aronoff and Kubik 2013; Mälksoo 2009; 2019). This critique is associated with a more significant issue that has

been addressed by literature on the quasi-orientalization of Eastern Europe (Wolff 1994; Zarycki 2014; Kuus 2004). Following the work of Edward Said on the inherent power dynamic in the Western perception of the East, studies have identified a similar dynamic in the case of Eastern Europe. In contrast to the opposition between the Orient and the Occident, the location of Eastern Europe in the Western imaginary has been more ambiguous. Larry Wolff has argued that Eastern Europe emerged as a mediating ground for the Enlightenment notions of civilization and barbarism; a space which is geographically and culturally in Europe, though not recognized as fully European (Wolff 1994). Eastern Europe has been used to capture the scale of respective development and backwardness, with Western Europe located in the side of progress while Eastern Europe strives towards full development and civilization (Wolff 1994).

With the end of the Cold War, the idea of the developmental scale was reproduced through paradigms of transition and Europeanization, where Eastern Europeans were learning norms that were articulated by their Western European partners (Kuus 2004). In this context, liberal democracy has served as a signpost to which Eastern Europeans should strive both institutionally and culturally, but which with the present reversal of liberal values, appears to have painfully failed, as has been discussed in the backsliding literature (Mälksoo 2019).

The democratization scholarship has been embedded in the idea of a civilizational ‘East-West slope’, where countries try to climb higher in terms of their ‘transition’ and ‘normalization’ (Melegh 2006, 9). The EU enlargement, Europeanization, and current ‘falling out’ have been emphasized by the perspective of Eastern Europeans being taught and growing into political maturity, or in the words of the former Czech president Václav Havel: ‘these nations have simply not had enough time to become political adults’ (quoted in Mälksoo 2009, 62).

The literature on democratic backsliding reproduces the teleological view of Eastern Europe as it reduces any reading of the situation in the region in terms of either the return to nationalism or the return to the linear progress of liberal democracy. Even more contextually sensitive accounts retain this overall assumption of post-communist studies. They are rooted in an idealised image of a political culture that Eastern European states must strive to achieve if they are to be considered ‘real’ democracies. Thus, the Orientalizing view of democratization studies remains fundamentally unchallenged: Eastern Europeans are aware that they still must learn to become democrats, while their ‘nationalist fantasies’ have to be ‘kept in check’ according to rules set by the West (Kuus 2004, 475), and they must deal with ‘overcoming of the socialist past or their “problematic notions of culture”’ (Dzenovska 2018, 30).

The continuity of the Orientalizing perspective can be understood by looking at the crucial role it plays in constructing Western European identity. Post-communist states’ striving to be included in European institutions set the mark for the normative and moral superiority of Western European values (Dzenovska 2018) – such as liberal democracy and the free market. Rather than embracing individual rights, plurality, and a post-national mindset, Eastern Europe’s collectivist and nationalist thinking symbolize the ideologies that Europe has left behind

(Mälksoo 2009; 2019; Melegh 2006). The rhetoric in Eastern Europe concerning the sovereignty and rights of the nation, especially regarding the regulation of migration, is a normative provocation to the very grounds of the European project (Mälksoo 2019, 366). The internal instabilities and the self-identification of the EU with the ‘successful promoter of democracy, an efficient socializer of Eastern European “students” into an inclusionary liberal institution, and therefore a bold unifier of the continent’ (Mälksoo 2019, 371) makes this an especially sharp provocation. For academics and politicians who are deeply committed to the liberal democratic vision of the European Union, the democratic backsliding of Eastern Europe is not simply a failure of the post-communist transition but an attack on one of the key elements of European identity. Orientalizing perspectives have also been internalized in Eastern Europe (Kuus 2004). Academic discourses in the region have reproduced notions such as ‘Homo Sovieticus’ by devising broad generalizations about the maladjustment to democracy by certain groups of the population (Aronoff and Kubík 2013). Orientalism has become more of a mental border of development and backwardness between countries and within them – including Eastern Europe – to mark social difference, inclusion, and exclusion (Buchowski 2006).

While democratic theory notably entails the apprehension that the end goal of liberal democracy is more of an ideal form and a theoretical concept, scholarship on Eastern Europe has regularly engaged in explaining digressions from this ideal model. Because of the civilizational outlook on the region, as well as the explicit and implicit hierarchies posited between Eastern and Western Europe, the literature is characterized by an expectation of Eastern Europe backsliding from the ‘normal’ democratic regime along with the need to justify Eastern European correspondence to liberal democratic ideals. The notions of ‘backsliding’ and ‘empty shell’ (Dimitrova 2010, 146) along with descriptions such as “‘surface’, ‘fake’, ‘non-authentic’, ‘imitative’, ‘Potemkin-village like’” (Zarycki 2014, 5) reflect and reproduce the teleological and reductive framework of analysing democratization in Eastern Europe, even in the cases where it attempts to convey greater analytical nuance.

As Mälksoo (2019, 368) insists, the critical analysis of Western normative hegemony does not aim to relativize xenophobic rhetoric, the concentration of power through constitutional changes, restrictions of minority rights, and media freedom, all of which have occurred in Eastern European states. These policies are indeed undemocratic and raise legitimate concerns. However, in as much as similar democratic transgressions have been identified in mature Western democracies, it becomes clear that ‘backsliding’ cannot be blamed on ‘problematic’ Eastern European culture alone. A discussion about possible causes of democratic crises and potential alternatives to the liberal democratic conceptual framework can only be possible in a more general context (Aronoff and Kubík 2013). Any digressions from the dominant interpretation of liberal democracy originating in Eastern Europe are perceived as signs of the region’s undemocratic nature (Dzenovska 2018).

As the next chapter will show, the institutional-procedural model has been viewed quite critically in critical democratic theoretical perspectives on its limited account of political will and identity formation. The lack of different theoretical perspectives in the transition paradigm has meant that it possesses only limited analytical resources to describe factors that do not fit into the dominant model of democratic consolidation. Instead, through the long pedigree of the quasi-orientalist perspective on Eastern Europe in Western academia, cultural and historical context have been treated in essentialist terms, thereby continually re-affirming the difference between the East and the West. The relevant question concerns how one should frame the study of history and current developments of democracy in the region that would go beyond this divide, and which would take greater consideration of constitutive accounts of political identity formation. This task falls to the next chapter.

2.4. Conclusions

In the course of transition and democratization studies of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, the analysis of democratic processes has swung between institutional and cultural explanations. While the transition appeared to be swift and successful, factors linked with sociological dimensions such as lower political participation and political trust were left in the background. Once the problems (re)appeared, studies have prominently framed differences between Western and Eastern Europe in terms of culture. Though the Baltic states have not exhibited any significant crumbling of democratic institutions as has been observed elsewhere in the region, the same dynamic of analysis also appears there. The existing perspectives on democracy in Latvia are routinely situated in Eastern European and post-communist area studies, thereby reflecting the dominant outlook of the transition paradigm. At the start of the transition, the establishment of functioning democratic institutions was considered a priority, with a discussion about the propensity to democracy in the local political culture left in the background. This debate came to the foreground once the democratic credentials of various Central and Eastern European countries came into question. In the literature on the ‘democratic backsliding’ of Eastern Europe, gaps in the earlier transition paradigm were identified, inviting researchers to focus greater attention on sociologically and culturally oriented analytical lenses to uncover the causes of democratic failing in the region. However, as researchers in postcolonial critical scholarship have argued, scholarly perspectives on Eastern Europe tend to be Eurocentric, and these long-term identity hierarchies are at least partly reflected in the cultural determinism of the scholarship on democracy in the region. This situatedness of Western academic perspectives on Eastern Europe combined with the lack of more diverse democratic theorizing underlies the inability to engage more productively and less teleologically with cultural and historical contexts of these countries.

The premise of this dissertation, which will be discussed in greater detail in further theoretical sections on radical theory, is that democracy should be viewed as a signpost for political openness. This openness can be understood in various ways, but most significantly, it concerns the process of political subjectification and identification. Concerning highly critical or passive attitudes towards most representative institutions in Latvia, my main interest is what insight the discursive framing of these attitudes can provide for understanding the relationship between radical democratic openness and representative institutions.

The dissertation advances the specific argument that democratic openness has to be linked with representative institutions at a structural level, namely, at the level of symbolic self-representation. This condition is not met in Latvia, which has resulted in a persistent tension in how the self-representation of ‘the people’ is embodied by democratic institutions. The most widely applied versions of radical democratic theory, exemplified by Ernesto Laclau’s framework, would not illuminate this issue, since they underemphasize the specific role of representative institutions in radical theorizing of democracy as, in contrast to Laclau, offered by Claude Lefort. The next chapter unfolds this argument before continuing to a specific analysis of Latvia in the context of radical democratic theorizing, thereby re-interpreting the signification of historical and cultural elements in Eastern European identities and moving beyond the ‘learning curve’ view on analysing democratization in the region.

A final point before moving forward concerns potential objections of radical and critical scholarship being Western-centric and thus presenting a similar dynamic of ‘learning’ as the transition literature critiqued above. The difference is that radical perspectives refuse to devise universal categories of analysis, whose value is their generalizability across different contexts. In this dissertation, I will take up arguments and ideas developed in radical scholarship and reassess their value for the specific case of Latvia, while simultaneously addressing its potential contributions and limitations. While my end goal is not to develop an overarching radical democratic theory, one of my objectives is to contribute to normative theorizing in radical perspectives while maintaining a commitment to post-foundationalist philosophy.

3. Representative Institutions and Radical Democratic Theory: Approaches, Normativity, and the Role of Liberalism

3.1. Introduction

This chapter sets out to frame the central theoretical question of how to conceptualize representative institutions in a radical democratic way. The 2nd chapter on studies of democracy in Eastern Europe showed that few interpretative frameworks are capable of accounting for the issues of democratic governance beyond the level of institutional consolidation. Continually low trust in Latvian political institutions is one example of such an issue. This opens the broader theoretical question of how to conceptualize democratic representation, and the relation between the representatives and the represented. Political representation in political science literature has broadly been approached in terms of institutions and procedures, and underlies many of the perspectives in the transition literature that were previously discussed. More recently, democratic theorists have opened new avenues for viewing political representation as a constitutive and creative process, as opposed to a mode of interest aggregation and transfer (Urbinati 2006; Brito Viera 2017; Disch 2017; Disch, van de Sande and Urbinati 2019). Many of these conceptualizations, though well-recognized in democratic theory, have received far less attention in mainstream political science (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021). Considering the theoretical limitations in analysing the relationship between citizens and their governments, which was the focus of the last chapter, the present chapter engages novel perspectives on political representation and develops their further empirical application.

Transition literature has been embedded in the broader paradigm of political science that views representation as a primarily institutional mechanism, and secondly, as a part of political culture and behaviour. The latter has mostly been treated in terms of trust and the general quality of civic participation. In contrast to the procedural level, the level of culture and behaviour has proven to be much more difficult to pin down. As the next section will discuss in detail, this is the challenge confronted by today's research about the crisis of representative democracy, which is identified by continually decreasing levels of election turnouts and other forms of political participation. By researchers' own acknowledgement, the main problem in understanding this crisis is rooted in the difficulty of determining which factors are the most important for measuring political support. Thus, it is difficult to conclude which indicators of trust and participation are the most integral for the survival of democracy. A more multidimensional view on representation in democratic systems provides a new perspective on these challenges by moving beyond the simple divide between the representative and the represented. The section on the 'representative turn' in democratic theory will further unfold this line of argument.

This chapter sets out to address the key aspect of the theoretical debate with respect to constructivist perspectives on political representation, which broadly defined, express reservations about normative criteria. The problem concerns how to conceptualize agency, power and legitimacy in the process of ‘making constituencies’, to borrow a book title from Lisa Disch (Disch 2021). Furthermore, in the post-foundationalist perspective, which is the focus of this dissertation, representation becomes an ontological concept that is ascribed to the constitution of social reality. All in all, the relationship between the representative and the represented becomes blurred in a way that makes it more difficult to establish criteria for democratic and non-democratic politics. While theorists like Nadia Urbinati seek to set a clear normative framework for assessing democratic representation from the constitutive point of view, they leave aside the deeper, ontological matter of understanding politics as a space for forming social subjectivities. This is post-foundationalist viewpoint that characterizes many radical constructivist perspectives on political representation, which I explore through the works of Ernesto Laclau and Claude Lefort. For both theorists, a political realm is a space which constitutes social reality and relations, and does not presuppose given social facts. As the later sections of the chapter will show, post-foundationalist perspectives have faced criticism concerning their normative deficit and moral relativism. While much of this criticism has already been refuted, the question of the relationship between democratic normativity and post-foundational politics remains. Oliver Marchart has been among the few to directly address it, and in this dissertation, my aim is to further this discussion on the normative dimension of post-foundational democratic politics.

My main argument on the normative dimension of radical democratic theory focuses on Lefort’s conception of power in the context of his perspective on democracy, which is situated in the ‘third place’ (Flynn 2019), not as a signifier which is fixed through a hegemonic struggle. For Laclau, this post-foundational premise can be theorized through the concepts of hegemony, antagonism, and a political relationship between the particular and the ‘universal’. For Lefort, however, a ‘third position’ exists, namely, a place of power that is not identified with any particular actor. One of Lefort’s key insights is that this place of power in democracy is symbolized – but not taken – by representative institutions. This ontological position of representative institutions is the main idea for which I argue in thinking about the normative dimension of post-foundational political theory – one that, in my view, has not received full attention in the context of Claude Lefort’s works.

If other radical theorists mostly conceptualize power in terms of domination, Lefort distinguishes (modern) democratic power as an ‘empty place’: for the first time in written history, the structuring of the social realm is defined by the indeterminacy of the source of power (Lefort 1988). Institutions – those that represent ‘the people’ as a source of power, while never becoming identical with power – are the key normative criterion of democracy. However, representative institutions, understood in such an ontologically-structural way, are not exclusively associated with liberal democracy, and their role in radical theorizing should be reaffirmed.

The following sections will unpack this argument and further situate it within the wider context of radical democratic perspectives. But first, the following two sections will be dedicated to a brief critical review of studies on the crisis of representative democracy and, subsequently, expand upon constructivist views of political representation.

3.2. General Research about the Crisis of Representative Democracy

Studies on the support for democratic institutions began in the 1950s and 1960s with the seminal contributions of David Easton's theory of attributes of political systems (Easton 1965) and Sidney Almond and Gabriel Verba's study of political culture (Almond and Verba 1989). Both works have guided political science research on democratic support ever since. These studies have made the lasting contribution of promoting the understanding that the overall stability and success of democracies is linked with deeply-seated attitudes and beliefs in their societies, even a 'state of mind'. Trust and confidence in political institutions were described as making citizens 'more willing to turn power over to political elites' (Almond and Verba 1989, 352). High levels of political trust are associated with the endurance and stability of democracy due to the 'reservoir' of support in times of hardship, unpopular policies, and other dissatisfactory conditions, with the government's general ability to draw legitimacy and resources, as well as with citizens' readiness to follow legal and social norms (Almond and Verba 1989; Putnam 2004; Norris 2011).

In light of these premises, since the 1970s, many have expressed serious concern about the significant drop in voter turnout and increasing citizen mistrust towards core political institutions such as political parties, parliament, and government in the U.S. and in Western Europe (Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Dalton 2004; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017). These trends can essentially be explained along two lines: the first one focuses on the economic and institutional performance of the state, whereas the other addresses the causes associated with political socialization and culture. Economic performance is measured by citizen satisfaction with political institutions to the degree that they approve state's economic performance, while institutional performance concerns the functioning and evaluation of institutional setup, from the election system and government formation to the work of politicians and bureaucrats (van der Meer 2017; Mishler and Rose 2001).

The second group of explanations draws attention to the impact of societal values and norms, along with other cultural factors. Two of the most influential theoretical accounts in this vein are Robert Putnam's concept of social capital and Ronald Inglehart's theory on the post-materialism of Western societies. The basic idea of social capital is that strong social ties between members of the same community increase the likelihood of their more substantial involvement in politics, leading to higher satisfaction with democratic institutions (Putnam 2004). Putnam

argues that traditional forms of political participation have declined in Western democracies since the 1950s due to the universal decline of organized mass social institutions – such as churches, political parties, and trade unions. The importance of trustful and associative ties in society has also been linked with the state's economic development (Fukuyama 1996), avoiding clear-cut borders between cultural and economic explanations. In fact, Inglehart's post-materialist view is partly economic, as it proposes that industrialized welfare democracies underwent an attitudinal shift among generations from the value of survival to that of self-expression and a higher support for democracy (Inglehart 2003).

Inglehart's theory reflects the ambiguity in interpretations of democratic crisis since, while Western democracies arguably have experienced economic, institutional and cultural growth that should be conducive to democratic support, the indicators of political participation and support show the opposite. Some authors have interpreted this as not a fundamental rejection of democracy but as a new type of democracy and more critical engagement with politics on the behalf of citizens (Zmerli and Hooghe 2011; Norris 2011). Pippa Norris describes 'critical citizens' as a new generation of citizens that keep high expectations about how democracy should work but express strong scepticism over how it functions in their own country. Robert Putnam has also acknowledged that the decline of traditional social capital 'seems to be offset in part by the relative importance of informal, fluid, personal forms of social connection' (Putnam 2004, 411–12), meaning non-institutionalized channels of social communication. Others find that institutionalized forms of participation might be replaced or supplemented by non-institutionalized forms of activism, meaning that low levels of political trust are associated with traditional measures, not those which are non-institutionalized (Hooghe and Marien 2013). Nevertheless, evidence still suggests that support for democracy as a regime has decreased across Western democracies, thereby questioning the 'critical citizens' paradigm and raising the alarm about democracy's supposedly firm grounding in the West (Foa and Mounk 2016).

One factor that has complicated interpretations of the democratic crisis is the ability to measure political support itself. Most scholars would agree that these factors are not just economic, institutional, or cultural factors alone but a certain combination of all of them. Existing empirical research has provided a limited basis for testing various hypotheses. Scholars simply lack a comprehensive and cross-national collection of data that would tell 'how much low and declining levels of political trust should be of concern to representative democracy' (Zmerli and van der Meer 2017, 8). One important reason for that could be the difficulty associated with interpreting political concepts in different cultural contexts (Zmerli and Hooghe 2011).

To take political trust as an example, researchers themselves disagree about the definition of the term, and how to measure and interpret it. For instance, what specifically about political institutions and actors are people being asked to evaluate when they are asked about trust? Are they being asked to think about current political parties and politicians or about the political system more generally? Pippa Norris distinguishes between five different dimensions of political support:

starting from the (1) general support for the national community, leading to (2) support for the principles of the regime, (3) evaluation of the overall performance of the regime, followed by (4) confidence in state institutions, and (5) trust in elected and appointed officeholders (Norris 2011). She argues that trust should be viewed as a continuum which accounts for both affective beliefs and rational calculation and the degrees to which these factors can be directed to various elements of a political system. However, March Hooghe argues that citizens do not distinguish between different institutions and actors, as they associate trust with the embeddedness of a regime within a single political culture (Hooghe 2011). Trust is ‘not an individual characteristic of a person, or even of a political party or an institution, but of the political system as a whole’ (Hooghe 2011, 27). The consensus about the severity and the definition of the democratic crisis is thus inconclusive, and the general consequences of the declining indicators of traditional representative democracy remain unclear (Ham et al. 2017).

The openness of interpreting the research results on political support from the political science standpoint shows that the question of defining political representation is as relevant as it has ever been. The overview above illustrates the ambiguity in defining the crisis if it is identified with liberal democracy, since, on the one hand, indications of citizens’ engagement in politics are certainly high, but, on the other hand, the traditional ‘input – output’ political system, as formulated by Easton, appears to be in a crisis. The levels of political trust and electoral turnouts – arguably the key indicators of democratic legitimacy, are in decline, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, as was discussed in the previous chapter. Attention should thus turn to the theoretical debate about the conceptualizations of democracy and political representation. The next section will discuss a relatively recent and highly influential debate in democratic theory that calls into question the neat division between the government and citizens, and argues for political representation as a constitutive, as opposed to a transactional process. These novel perspectives on political representation as a multifaceted, complex process of forming wills, identities and interests shed a very different light on the cornerstone of political science theories of voters’ ‘input – output’ relationship with a political system. However, they still face important normative issues in theorizing the relationship between different actors in the democratic process.

3.3. The ‘Representative Turn’ in Democratic Theory

Hanna Pitkin’s book on political representation is arguably one of the most influential works in political science (Pitkin 1972). Despite being widely quoted, this work has not sprung a wealth of further conceptualizations of political representation, but has instead remained the exception in political science literature. The reason for this can likely be found in the overall dominance of defining representation as a procedural mechanism in political science, rather than as a substantive concept of distinct value to the democratic process. Pitkin was among the first to emphasize a distinct and important role for representation, with her

book dedicated to finding the balance between two equally important but historically contradictory ideas of democracy and representation. In contrast to the minimal democracy model, which would limit the political participation of citizens to elections, and the participatory democracy model, which would view representation as a substitute for democracy, Pitkin argued for the ethical and responsive, but also independent position of representatives (Urbinati and Warren 2008).

Pitkin opens her book by stating that democracy and representation are two distinctly separate phenomena that each has its own conceptual history (Pitkin 1967, 2–3). Pitkin's comprehensive survey of representation places its origin as a political phenomenon in the Middle Ages, where it evolved in connection with the broadened understanding of the monarch's sovereignty. By contrast, the idea of democratic representation is very recent, and is connected with the emergence of movements for mass emancipation and the idea of self-governance. Thus, with the advent of modern democracy, where the sovereignty of the people is at most represented indirectly, these understandings of representation stand in a complex relationship to each other. From this premise, Pitkin sets out to create typologies of democratic representation and to offer a normative evaluation of them.

Pitkin starts with the formalistic representation that emphasizes the power and the authority of the representative; for Pitkin, this conveys the Hobbesian worldview where constituents retain responsibility for political decisions through the act of authorization, but only the representative has the monopoly on decision-making (Pitkin 1967, 38–39; 53). It is clear that while the relationship between the represented and the representative is functional, Pitkin does not view it as properly democratic since it does not require accountability from representatives. As she argues, formal representation essentially occurs when the government and the people neither cooperate nor identify with each other, meaning their only ties are based on authorization, i.e., the government acting in the name of the people (Pitkin 1967, 213). While formalistic representation might seem rather distant from democratic ideals, its key function is the establishment of undivided national sovereignty, which is a much less contested form of representation than others.

Pitkin defines yet another view on representation which she refers to as descriptive representation. This refers to the identification between the representative and the represented, and emphasizes the need for the government to mirror the people and their characteristics (Pitkin 1967, 61). Here, what the representatives are takes precedent over what they do. Government can take an independent and active role, but its primary purpose is to transfer information about its constituents (Pitkin 1967, 81–82). While the descriptive model is the opposite of formalistic representation, Pitkin does not view it as democratically viable. She opposes the idea that a relationship with representatives is created based not upon arguments and deliberation but on the basis of their similarity to the represented or their emotional and symbolic value (Pitkin 1967, 213). In those terms, symbolic representation is even worse for Pitkin, wherein the criteria for identification are purely based on belief, emotions, and loyalty tied to a symbol, be it a leader or an inanimate object (Pitkin 1967, 107). The lack of any logical, deducible

point of choosing a representative sets a dangerous precedent for claiming absolute power (Pitkin 1967, 107).

Pitkin posits the alternative substantive view, which values both the independent, self-discretionary action by the representative and the independent, engaged judgment by the represented (Pitkin 1967, 209). The relationship between the two is a continuum where the focus on consultation, discretion, and issues can shift, but it should not reach any of the extremes (Pitkin 1967, 210–211). Through the substantive model, Pitkin tries to define the state of equilibrium of political representation, as a state of perfect correspondence with constituents (i.e., descriptive representation) as well as one where absolute or arbitrary decision-making by representatives (i.e., formal representation) stops the need for representation.

Pitkin's account uncovers two distinct logics of democratic representation. One strives towards the independence of the representative and the other towards the identification with the represented. Neither should be perfectly realized if democratic representation is to be effective. She attempts to solve this conundrum in such a way that seems to move toward deliberative models of democracy, but she ultimately does not focus on detailed institutional maps. Unfortunately, Pitkin did not provide many more details, except for a general formulation of the role of the representative (Urbinati and Warren 2008). Her overview, however, categorizes the main conceptions of political representation in ways that are very relevant today. For instance, Pitkin's critical view on descriptive representation makes an interesting point of comparison with those contemporary perspectives that underscore the need for representatives to reflect the diversity of society and, in many cases, to act as a proxy for minority groups. Pitkin's critical position on symbolic representation puts her at odds with the majority of constructivist views on representation, as will be discussed below. Rather, her view on politics is based on rational deliberation and mutual interaction between the government and the public, which she later admitted was too idealistic (Pitkin 2004).

Pitkin's work also needs to be put in the wider context of the history of political ideas, where the tension between democracy, understood as citizens' direct action, and representation, understood as an approximation of democracy or as a safeguard against unguided masses, has taken centre stage. As David Runciman and Monica Brito Vieira have shown, what would effectively correspond to Pitkin's formal view of representation has dominated the history of political thought. According to this view, representation is established by treating the Hobbesian conception of sovereignty as a foundational point of politics, which is revolutionary in the sense that it is not enabled by any other authority. But, once the Hobbesian sovereign has been authorized by the represented, there is nothing that anyone can really do to limit or dispute its authority. So, subsequent theorists have tried to address the ways in which representation could function with input from constituents. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, accepted Hobbes's secularized notion of politics but completely opposed his conception of representation (Brito Vieira, Runciman 2008, 34). For Rousseau, institutions divorced people from their ability to rule. For him, the link between society and political authority had to be set up and detailed in a way that acknowl-

edged peoples' right to rule as well as the necessity for arranging society itself. Emmanuel Sieyès conceptualized representation by accentuating both Hobbesian politics as the establishment of society and Rousseau's need to acknowledge the will of the people (Brito Viera, Runciman 2008, 34–35).

Even after the period of democratic revolutions, European political thought still revolved around formal representation. For Edmund Burke, the point of representation was to (re)create the image of society, not to reflect an aggregation of individuals; a view he upheld as he didn't believe in the people's will, but rather in a reasoned judgement by authority (Brito Viera, Runciman 2008, 42). Perhaps similarly to Rousseau, John Stuart Mill stood between the two poles of democracy and representation. On the one hand, he formulated a view on government that emphasized its correspondence to constituents. On the other hand, he viewed government as a space for articulating the will or interests of the people as opposed to mirroring them (Brito Viera, Runciman 2008, 50). For Max Weber, representation in mass democracies meant an inherent threat of elitism through the rule of bureaucracies. This type of representation had to be opposed by political leadership that conjured social unity with both democratic and undemocratic elements (Brito Viera, Runciman 2008, 54).

The limits of formal representation were tackled by the descriptive model, which appeared after the watershed moments of the French and American Revolutions, and which created a different but equally strong political tradition. In this vein of thinking, closeness between the representative and the represented took centre stage as an ideal, which often resulted in the people's suspicion towards the existing government, which they perceived as elitist and potentially oppressive. A significant dimension of descriptive representation has thus concerned the limitation of government, and other negative measures directed towards it. The most radical proponent of this view was Jeremy Bentham, but this sentiment was also echoed by James Mill and in the Anti-Federalists' contributions to the American Constitution (Brito Viera, Runciman, 2008:40–41; 45–48). In contrast to the formal view, the premise of the descriptive model was that representatives should have a very limited, non-discretionary role that enables the self-governance of the people instead of transferring it to a distinct, separate political level.

Pitkin's categorization of representation and Brito Viera and Runciman's conceptual history underlines the paradoxical position of the government as both ruling over and as reflective of the political community. Assuming that formal authorization in Hobbesian terms is insufficient, the following question arises: put simply, how much independence can be assigned to the government? Conversely, how do we ensure that the democratic sovereign – 'the people' – still exercises political power? Furthermore, if core liberal representative institutions are relatively simple to point out, the basis of the criteria of defining who 'the people' are is much more complex. The evolution of the democratic tradition has ascribed the meaning of 'the people' both to the political community who have held political power and to the wider masses who have frequently been excluded from this same power (Canovan 2005, 5). Though electoral franchise has expanded the borders of political community, the connotations of elitism and

exclusion still are associated to the usage of ‘the people’ in the context of modern democratic politics as testified by populist parties across the world. Even instruments of direct democracy such as referendums and other participatory forms of democracy mostly fulfil the constitutional side of politics; the actual expression of popular sovereignty, the authority that can challenge its legal counterpart, is rare and unpredictable (Canovan 2005, 108, 114, 121). ‘The people’ cannot be simply identified with the legal embodiment of popular sovereignty such as a parliament. This would mean that legal institutions – political representatives – would possess an exclusive claim to the voice of ‘the people’, making it virtually impossible to legitimize grassroots, extra-institutional forms of mass mobilization.

All of these issues constitute the background in which we can situate the ‘representative turn’ (Näsström 2011; Disch, van de Sande, and Urbinati 2019) in democratic theory. Lisa Disch distinguishes between ‘representative’ and ‘constructivist’ turns, and identifies commonalities and differences between them (Disch 2019, 123). In the context of the continuous opposition between democracy and representation, the perspective of the ‘representative turn’ perspective has been to question this opposition by defining representations as inherent, rather than external, to the democratic process. As David Plotke states, the opposite of representation is not democracy, but exclusion: ‘representation is not an unfortunate compromise between an ideal of direct democracy and messy modern realities’, as the goal of democracy is not to try to reduce representation, but to make it ‘more open, effective, and fair’ (Plotke 1997, 19). This means that analysing representation is not about focusing more or less on the presence of individuals or groups in government institutions, since ‘physical persons and relations of political representation exist at different analytical levels’ (Plotke 1997, 30). Plotke’s key insight here is his refusal to identify representation as a simple descriptive or formal notion, but, by emphasizing the complexity of democratic decision-making, seeing it as a structuring and constituting force of the political space (Urbinati and Warren 2008).

The difficulties of democratic representation, as presented in Pitkin’s account, stem from pre-conceiving the government and the public as two distinct sides. As Nadia Urbinati states: if representative institutions are meant to be as descriptively close to citizens as possible, they will always fail to some degree and thereby become a ‘mockery of the form’. Hence, political theory is left with the task to ‘either capitulate to positivistic behaviourism and the science of public opinion surveys or become a hopeless lament of our political condition’ (Urbinati 2006, 13). Thus, the point is to revitalize and reconceptualize political representation by questioning the ideal of democracy as a form of direct self-governance, and to redefine representation practices as an inherent part of any democratic process (Urbinati 2006; Brito Viera 2017; Disch 2017; Disch, van de Sande and Urbinati 2019). Representation is about the process of forming, discussing, judging political will (Urbinati 2006); it is about enacting and performing ‘representative claims’ in different places, not fixing definite types and roles of a representative (Saward 2003; 2014); it is about reflecting on the ways in which

different preferences are set in motion, not merely transmitted, or mirrored (Disch 2017). All of these perspectives take representation as constitutive of political identities, will, and preferences by going beyond the representative and the represented dyad and transcending the significance of an individual presence (Disch 2017; Brito Vieira 2017).

While a range of authors share the constitutive view of representation described above, the ‘constructivist turn’ introduces epistemological and ontological dimensions to the study of representation (Disch 2019, 124–26). One of the key themes of the constitutive view is to extend representation to a much wider context than with which it is traditionally associated. Since representation is viewed as co-constitutive of democratic practices, it is not reducible to traditional representative institutions like parliament or political parties alone. The function of representation can go beyond the contexts of the electoral and even of the nation-state (Saward 2010). This perspective affords representation theorists with a new focus on issues of democratic legitimacy in situations where many important political decisions take place beyond the limits of national borders (Disch 2019). Michael Saward (2010) stresses the dynamic, aesthetic and cultural dimensions of representation, theorizing it as a process in which interests and the needs of particular constituencies are formulated and accepted. These makings of a ‘representative claim’ are not solely tied to particular institutions but are spread across a variety of potential social actors. In his focus on representation as a process, Saward is less interested in establishing strict criteria for founding the legitimacy of claims, in order to develop the means to distinguish between more or less democratic claims of representation. In this regard, Saward himself emphasises the constituents’ readiness to accept particular representative claims (Saward 2010, 145). While this might answer the question of legitimacy, it does not directly answer that of criteria for democracy.

Saward’s focus on the constitutive dimension reflects the constructivist strain in the literature on representation. This focus connects to the argument that, in contrast to traditional political institutions, ‘the people’ are not a readily formed authority who are ready to exercise immediately available power, but rather that ‘it/they, has/have to be in some way constructed, mobilized or represented’ (Canovan 2005, 88–89). Constructivists, including those who advance post-foundationalist perspectives, face similar critiques about the normative deficit of their approaches. In Saward’s case, the issue concerns the relationship between the representative and the represented, and the agency of the latter. One such question concerns how the links between the representative and the particular subject whom they represent are established in the first place, meaning that there is a need for certain conditions before representation even takes place (Decreus 2013). Furthermore, it raises the question: if one mainly focuses on the representative and the process of making claims, by what metric can political responsiveness be measured (Severs 2010)? According to constructivist and aesthetic conceptions of representation, the central problem is their explicit or implicit reliance on acts of the representative (Fossen 2019; Näsström 2011). In the broader conception of representation as the constitution of social identities, the

definition of the referent and their relation to the representative act becomes much more elusive (Fossen 2019).

Another criticism concerns the very broad scope of societal actors to which representation is potentially attributed. In this regard, institutions and institutional frameworks are argued to be the key mechanisms through which legitimacy and responsiveness can be addressed, which does not entail rejecting constitutive premises of representation (Wolkenstein 2021). Nadia Urbinati is among those representation theorists who are critical of the normative deficit in constructivist views on representation. One example of such a deficit for her is Laclau:

The domain of generality as a criterion of legitimacy disappears in the constructivist reading of the people. Politics becomes essentially power seeking and power shaping: a phenomenon for which legitimacy consists simply in winning the political conflict and enjoying the consent of the audience (Urbinati 2019, 33).

Urbinati belongs to the ‘representative turn’ in democratic theory with her conceptualization of representation as the formation of political will and judgement (Urbinati 2014; 2019). She maintains that democracy is a complex process of deliberation and decision-making, with representation encapsulating both the formal procedures and indirect forms of participation by which citizens rule through deliberation (Urbinati 2014). Urbinati opposes the ‘standard model’ of representation, where a single constituent is identified with a single set of interests which is then transmitted to political institutions. This is the reason why representation theorists are also critical of direct democracy initiatives that principally misjudge the role of representative practices (Saward 2010; Urbinati 2015). However, while Saward considers a wide variety of spaces of representation, Urbinati focuses more on the traditional areas of representative decision-making – but one in which citizens have significant negative power of judgement in day-to-day life (Urbinati 2016).

So, in this regard, Urbinati addresses two of the alleged shortcomings of the representative perspective – the normative and the institutional deficit. However, her account says little about the aesthetic and cultural facets of representation, or about how social and political subjectification appears in the first place. While Saward offers some directions for this, he still leaves the critique about the omnipresence of the representative and the unclear role of the represented unaddressed. Lisa Disch offers an answer by turning ‘the classic model of democratic legitimacy on its head: citizens are responding to politicians rather than the other way around’ (Disch 2019). She asserts that politicians are the ones that articulate political preferences and compete with each other in the process, yet their success is solely dependent on the responsiveness of citizens, who in turn acquire a political education through partisan competition (Disch 2019).

As mentioned above, Disch contrasts constructivist and representative turns in democratic theory. However, she also draws a distinction between radical constructivists and other constitutive representation theorists. Though they work within different frameworks, Saward and Urbinati still view representation as an

interplay between the two distinct parties of the representative and the represented (Disch 2015, 488). Drawing on Laclau's works, Disch opposes their perspective to the radical constructivist approach which treats representation as constitutive of social objectivity: 'the idea is that the subject of democratic politics – whether understood as a people, a constituency, or a group – becomes recognizable as a unified and not merely aggregated entity only by means of representation' (Disch 2015, 489). Other representative-turn theorists reviewed above do not account for the type of unity to which Disch refers – the political constitution of subjectivity in a field wherein such a unity is not a pre-given fact. For radical constructivists, unity is always a constructed and politically articulated phenomenon. For Disch, the normative dimension of this process lies in the gap between articulating representations and constituents' receptivity to them (Disch 2015, 493). While Urbinati would still probably argue that the competition over political ideas does not possess the necessary democratic element, for Disch, the fact of plurality in the political realm and the continuous interplay of formulating preferences possesses the necessary democratic element of resisting deterministic oppression of the public space by a single representative (Disch 2021).

The distinction between the act of representation and the constituents' reaction to it as a normative benchmark appears similar to Saward's proposition on criteria of legitimacy. However, according to Disch, Saward

likely leaves normative theorists unsatisfied because he puts the question of legitimacy to the constituency rather than to the theorist. He thereby forecloses "first-order" inquiry into who (or what) a constituency should or should not recognize as representing them (Disch 2015, 495).

Yet Disch's evaluation does not fully address the critiques of the constructivist approach to political representation. Even if we subscribe to the radical view on the political construction of social objectivity, as this dissertation does, and situate it as a 'first order' inquiry, the issues concerning power being the sole normative factor remain unaddressed. As Sofia Näsström has argued, one significant example here is Frank Ankersmit's aesthetic theory. Ankersmit is a radical constructivist in that he does not understand representative politics as mediating some objective reality but as essentially being a form of artistic creation – 'for without political representation we are without a conception of what political reality – the represented – is like; without it, political reality has neither face nor contours' (Ankersmit 2002, 115). He criticizes the overall closeness between the representative and the represented since he maintains that bringing politics closer to the people results in it becoming too technical and bureaucratized (Ankersmit 2002, 117). Since Ankersmit focuses on politicians more than on institutions, in his view, representatives acquire crucial authority over the object they convey – and this obviously can be seen as problematic (Näsström 2006). Yet another question arises: is the pluralism of the political sphere that Disch writes about enough, if we lack the ability to distinguish between more or less democratic politics, except in terms of their ability to mobilize the citizens?

This leads to a question asked by Disch: ‘do constructivists have to renounce their epistemological commitments for the sake of their commitments to democratic politics (Disch 2015, 496)?’ Can constructivist perspectives on representation be compatible with normatively richer standards of democratic legitimacy and offer a substantial critical edge (Wolkenstein 2021; Fossen 2019)? Disch does indeed have a point in arguing that not all normative theorists’ requirements for democratic legitimacy can be satisfied by the constructivist scholarship due to its epistemological premises. However, this dissertation argues that an important radical constructivist perspective concerning the place of power and democratic institutions is in fact possible. Claude Lefort, whose work has a crucial normative edge even though it has not been fully accounted for in the radical democratic literature, offers such a position. The following sections will be dedicated to developing this argument.

3.4. Radical Democracy and Representation: The Issue of Normativity

As Lisa Disch’s discussion on the differences between Michael Saward and Ernesto Laclau illustrates, constructivist approaches to political representation can be based on different epistemological premises. Saward, alongside other representative turn theorists like Nadia Urbinati, analyses representation in terms of its applicability to politics, insofar as it is traditionally understood. When writing about Laclau, Disch describes a different ontological understanding of representation, where it relates to the constitution of the whole terrain of social reality – social identifications, relations, and the meanings associated with them. In this dissertation, I also refer to this radical constructivist view as a post-foundationalist perspective. This difference in conceptualizing representation concerns the distinction between politics as an ontic and an ontological category, where the notion of ‘the political’ defines the post-foundational perspective of social analysis (Marchart 2007). A post-foundational perspective refers to any notion according to which society lacks ground upon which criteria for establishing different rules and relations of social realms like economy, justice or politics (Marchart 2007). This means that there is no external vantage point of legitimacy from which society can be assessed – only the norms that are constituted within society itself. This dimension of temporary grounding, which only becomes visible in particular moments, can be defined as ‘the political’ (Marchart 2007) – and this is precisely what should be understood as the ontological conception of representation. From a post-foundational perspective, the definition of social interests and relations becomes problematic to the extent that they cannot be made fully manifest in their presence. Thus, ‘representation can no longer be seen as the reflection of a presence’ (Thomassen 2017, 539–40).

Ernesto Laclau and Claude Lefort are among the key post-foundationalist theorists of representation (Thomassen 2019; Marchart 2007; 2019; 2022;

Näsström 2006; Geenens 2019). Claude Lefort was among the first to define representation as fundamentally integral to modern democracy. In doing this, he left behind the opposition between democracy and representation (Näsström 2006; Geenens 2019), the debate surveyed in the last section. For Lefort, society is constituted by the act of instituting a place of power, which then takes a particular form in its time and society (Lefort 1988, 11–12). That which is typically understood as a political regime, be it democracy or aristocracy, is a quasi-representation of power (Lefort 1988, 17). In this way, a regime concerns the very way a society is defined and relates to itself – its role ‘shaping [*mise en forme*] of human coexistence has, in one form or another, always been present, and it lies, so to speak, behind the theoretical constructs and advances in philosophical thought’ (Lefort 1988, 217).

The same perspective of the continuous self-constitution of the social characterizes the work of Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Laclau and Mouffe answer the question of the post-foundational perspective on the absent ground of social reality, where ‘there is no longer a centre which binds together power, law and knowledge’ is that of making it ‘possible and necessary to unify certain political spaces through hegemonic articulations’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 317). Hegemonic articulation is the key category for Laclau’s ontological notion of political constructions of the social, which he further develops in his solo work (Laclau 2005; 2006b; Critchley and Marchart 2004), and which I will discuss in detail below. As shown by Lisa Disch as well as Lasse Thomassen, Laclau, in the context of his work on hegemony, populism and democracy, can also be seen as a theorist of representation (Disch 2012; Thomassen 2019). In his framework, political identities and interests are not simply reproduced by political actors and institutions, but emerge through representation – democratic constituencies ‘are mobilized into conceiving themselves as and acting as a whole’ (Disch 2012, 208). He takes representation to constitute that which is represented (Thomassen 2019, 329). Thus, for both Lefort and Laclau, representation is integral to conceptualizing democracy because of its role in the constitution of sociality. The post-foundational perspective on representation fits into a wider radical democratic theory, which focuses on the impossibility of any completeness or finality of human subjectivity, as well as the role it plays in political life (Mouffe 1992; Derrida 2006; Rancière 2014).

Radical democratic theory brings philosophical questions about ontological undecidability, the role of pluralism and difference or *différance* (Derrida 2017) in the constitution of social reality all into the context of political theorizing. In this regard, the question of representation becomes attached to a wider debate on continental philosophy that has de-universalized categories of Western philosophical traditions. The premise of the absent foundation of society relates to questioning the great narratives of history and the progress of the classical Western tradition. It marks the emergence of a broader post-modernist perspective on politics as ‘a set of philosophical critiques of teleological and/or rationalist conceptions of nature, history, power, freedom, and subjectivity’ (Bennett 2004, 46). Radical democratic theory opposes the creation of any type of

normative models from the dominant traditions of political theory, be it procedural, minimal, or other, when those models create metanarratives about society in order ‘to help legitimate a theory’s claims about authority, the state, citizenship, freedom, rights, etc.’ (Bennett 2004, 48). Instead, radical theorists entertain notions of radical contingency, the absence of foundations, social difference, and plurality, among other notions in their approach to democracy (Honig 1996; Glynos 2003; Thomassen 2013). That also connects with the irreducibility of conflict or dealing with a potentiality of conflict since there are no grounds that could ensure any all-encompassing resolution. This is why, for instance, Chantal Mouffe is critical of Jürgen Habermas’s democratic theory: in her view, Habermas anticipates a compromise which would be acceptable for all based on reason (Mouffe 2009). ‘Reason’ in this case becomes an external instance to all partialities and differences – a view that many radical democrats reject (Mouffe 2009).

Mouffe’s objections to the deliberative model illustrate her contentions concerning the normative criteria, whose absence arguably distinguishes perspectives in radical democratic theory from most others. Because this theory insists upon the impossibility of devising an external viewpoint on society, radical democratic theory has often been criticised for its inability to provide standards of democratic legitimacy (Norval 2003). As was discussed in the previous section on the ‘representative turn’ in democratic theory, scholars have called radical constructivist perspectives on representation into question exactly with respect to their normative insufficiency. However, a post-foundationalist view on representation can be defended against such objections by emphasizing the normative importance of safeguarding the distance between the representative and the represented reality (Näsström 2006; Ankersmit 2003). The hope, which is especially characteristic of proponents of direct democracy, of erasing the distance between the act of political representation and the reality it represents, ultimately threatens both, since it is through representation that we can constitute a unified image of reality (Ankersmit 2003). The normative dimension of radical democracy is also linked with a certain philosophical position, which Bonnie Honig describes very well:

It is to give up on the dream of a place called home, a place free of power, conflict, and struggle, a place – an identity, a form of life, a group vision – unmarked or unruined by difference and untouched by the power brought to bear upon it by the identities that strive to ground themselves in its place (Honig 1996, 258).

This philosophical perspective connects with Derrida’s notions of the undecidability and incompleteness of any identity, a view also expressed by Honig as captured above. It frames an ethos of radical democracy, where radicality refers to the impossibility to ‘be known or realized; it is only possible as impossible, that is, as incomplete and imperfect – in short, as “to come”’ (Thomassen 2013, 170). Respect for the absence of any final grounding of society, and represen-

tation as a temporary constitution of reality are the crucial normative tenets of radical democratic theory.

However, Honig mentions another crucial dimension of analysis mentioned above, which is power. In radical perspectives, power is the more ambiguous concept, since the use of power in democratic politics appears to be unrestricted in the absence of any objectively identifiable criteria of legitimacy. Objections raised against radical theorists like Laclau focus on their indiscriminate approach to the mobilization and construction of political representations, whose power is defined by no other criteria than their success (Urbinati 2019; Rummens 2009). Yet the majority of radical theorists would approach the question of power less as a theoretical exercise than as a concrete, ideological historical struggle. In this regard, the reformulation of the Marxist legacy with its key normative concern of emancipation has been a main source for radical democratic theory. As Adrian Little and Moya Lloyd note, in the early 1990s, Stanley Aronowitz offered to replace the term ‘socialism’ with that of ‘radical democracy’, responding to the perception of crisis that had long targeted Western socialism, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union (Little and Lloyd 2008; Trend 1996). Post-Marxist perspectives in radical democracy can account for both those which directly criticize liberal democracies and those which still identify with liberal tradition, but with a goal of further democratizing it (Norval 2003).

So, while normative theorists have questioned the democratic standards of radical constructivists, radical theorists have, in fact, opposed democracy to liberalism, identifying the former with popular emancipation, and the latter with attempts to curb it in favour of those holding political and economic power (Mouffe 2009; Rancière 2014). This has meant that in many ways, the normative discussion in radical democratic theory entails criticizing contemporary liberal democratic systems and, explicitly or implicitly, countering liberalism to emancipation. The remaining discussion in this chapter will demonstrate that while this dissertation does not reject the radical democratic critique of the ills of liberalism, this critique has obfuscated the role of representative institutions in radical perspectives by identifying them with liberalism.

Oliver Marchart’s analyses make an important contribution to understanding the ambiguity of the normative relation between emancipation and radical democratic theory. In his 2007 book *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Marchart contrasts thinkers such as Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, to Lefort and Laclau by arguing that ‘for Badiou and other thinkers true politics is always, and by definition, emancipatory’ (Marchart 2007, 158). He continues by stating that ‘what can be witnessed in either case is the same tendency towards an emancipatory apriorism’ – however:

such an apriorism is a clear *non sequitur* if we take seriously the ontological difference between politics and the political. What the gap between the ontic and the ontological, between politics and the political indicates is precisely that no particular ontic politics can ever be grounded within the ontological realm of the

political, but will always have to be articulated within the space opened by the play of the political difference. (Marchart 2007, 159).

For Marchart here, post-foundational politics is democratic when it respects the gap and the distance between the absence of any determinate grounds of the social and the political, ontic representations of society. In his 2019 essay “Don Alejandro’s Fantasy: Radical Democracy and the Negative Concept of Representation”, Marchart writes that ‘radical democracy can be defined as an emancipatory project that is premised upon an unreserved recognition of alienation, opacity and representation as constitutive facts of democratic life’ (Marchart 2007, 144). In this case, he links the post-foundational view of representation, with radical democracy and emancipatory political projects. While I do not object to ascribing radical democracy to the normative principle of emancipation, I would pose the question of whether the other important normative focus of post-foundationalism, namely, the gap which is identified with representation, can get lost in this reading.

In his 2019 essay, Marchart keeps the normative emphasis on representation, but is much more critical of present-day liberal democracies, as he argues that it is not enough to have representation if a large share of people is in fact excluded, and the inclusion criteria are in several ways restrictive (Marchart 2019). He opposes Ankersmit and Laclau, only the latter of which is able to tackle the need to expand popular sovereignty while respecting post-foundational politics, with the former implicitly favouring liberal and conservative-tinted compromise politics (Marchart 2019). In this dissertation, however, I show that Laclau’s framework is not enough to account for post-foundational theorizing of democracy in the case of Latvia. In his 2007 book, Marchart convincingly demonstrates how Lefort places the institutional framework at the centre of the ‘acceptance of the groundlessness of the social’ – the key defining feature of democratic politics (Marchart 2007, 104). In the following sections, I will show that there are important differences in how Laclau and Lefort conceptualize power, the construction of unity and the role that institutions take in this operation. In turn, these differences constitute different normative categories of analysis for democratic politics. Through this discussion, my goal is not to refute the pertinence of popular sovereignty and emancipation with respect to radical democracy. However, my claim is that many radical democratic perspectives opposed emancipation and popular sovereignty to liberalism and traditional representative institutions. The problem arises when this opposition begins to potentially obfuscate the gap between the representative and represented by primarily identifying institutions with liberalism. In the remaining two sections of the chapter, I will first discuss the relationship between radical democracy, liberalism and representative institutions, and then continue with a concrete analysis of the differences between Lefort and Laclau, as well as some implications for radical democratic theory.

3.5. Between Radical and Liberal Democracy: The Issue of Representative Institutions

The question of how to conceptualize institutions in radical democratic theory has to be viewed in the wider context of its roots in reformulating Marxist and socialist theory. The post-Marxist perspective, in the context of the supposed 'end of history' and the victory of Western liberal democracy, played a defining role in many radical theorists' work. Radical democratic theory was supposed to offer a leftist answer to the world that seemingly had proven the impossibility of practicing Marxist theory (Little and Lloyd 2008). The key objectives of revitalized perspectives on the left were the ideals of equality and popular participation, which radical democrats maintained were not truly realized in liberal democracies (Trend 1996). Liberal democracy was seen as sacrificing the inclusion of wider, diverse interests and identities in the name of a broader societal consensus (Trend 1996). The crisis of representative democracy, as reflected by low levels of political trust and participation, as well as the rise of right-wing extremism in Western democracies, was viewed as the result of the failed liberal promise to guarantee popular sovereignty (Mouffe 1992). Overall, in this line of thought, radical democracy becomes defined by the extension of the principle of equality, which initiates political change through various forms of practice (Tambakaki 2019).

In radical democratic theory, equality is positioned at the opposite pole of liberalism, with both poles together forming the 'democratic paradox', which both opposes and intertwines popular sovereignty with a liberal emphasis on individual rights and liberties (Mouffe 2009; Marchart 2019). Within this opposition, one also finds an important variety of views. For example, a range of authors, such as Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, ultimately reject liberal democratic politics and develop a new reading of communism. Likewise, thinkers such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt view mass participation as the only authentic mode of politics. In this context, Laclau and Mouffe's perspective is more compatible with liberal institutions, and is precisely the reason for the break between Laclau and Žižek as well as for Mouffe's critique of Negri and Hardt. Jacques Rancière and Claude Lefort can also be included in the post-Marxist vein, though they broke with its categories of analysis early on. Rancière offers a radical critique of liberalism that positions emancipation at its centre but views it as a continuous struggle between the general 'majority' and 'minority'. Lefort, in turn, places institutions which are associated with liberalism, such as the general ballot, at the centre of his analysis on the nature of modern democracies.

Their important differences notwithstanding, one significant commonality among these authors is that they all focus on the exercise of popular sovereignty; that is, with the arrival of 'the people', 'multitude', or 'part with no part' onto the political stage. For liberal democracy, this generally poses a challenge to, and indeed a fundamental transformation of, its static, unjust power structures. The rejection of consensus and compromise, which is characteristic of the radical democratic view, is principally targeted at those institutions that symbolize the

entrenchment and persistence of dominant worldviews. The same negation of the static role of institutions can be found in non-Marxist perspectives which are critical of liberalism and directed against the state's domination over popular participation and sovereignty. In the critical tradition, one finds Jean Jacques Rousseau, while in critical theory, one finds Jürgen Habermas' deliberative democracy (Norval 2003, 725), alongside other contemporary scholars such as Jacques Rancière, Sheldon Wolin, Richard Rorty and others (Wolin 2021; Rancière 2014). One element that unites these perspectives is the critical view on the state as simply an aggregation of rational, automatized individuals (Norval 2003, 724), instead affording politics and political life a much more significant and constitutive role. In this view, liberal democracies in their present form are criticized for being unable to provide that sphere of political life and for isolating citizens to their private lives. Thus, the variety within the radical democratic theory notwithstanding, they all stand upon a common axis of viewing institutions as somehow precluding citizens from becoming subjects in political life instead of being passive objects of the political system. And while most of this critique is directed against liberalism, the implicit or explicit assumption of their stupefying effect on citizens also concerns institutions as a whole.

It is worthwhile to take a closer look at the critical perspective of Jacques Rancière, who challenges institutions but doesn't necessarily identify them with liberalism. For Rancière, the social realm is dominated by two logics: the logic of domination and the logic of equality. The logic of domination refers not simply to economic or social exclusion, narrowly understood, but the subjectivity of the excluded by virtue of not being present in the public realm at all. Democratic action is the assertion of one's equality as given, in a way that renders the logic of domination meaningless (Rancière 2007). In this sense, democracy comes before the government and is never coincident with government: the logic of equality arises in response to 'a hierarchical ordering and allotment of roles (and rights)' of the liberal order (Rancière 2014, 52). Therefore, in Rancière's terms, any act of institutionalization is already an act of power that stands in opposition to democracy. So, while Rancière ascribes hierarchies to liberalism, the identification of democracy with the extension of equality does not leave much room for institutionalization. Thus, it is possible to argue that for Rancière, political institutions incorporate more of a structural position than expressing liberal ideology – they are a tool in the logic of domination.

Rancière is critical of liberal democracy, as he argues that liberalism upholds the distinction between private and public, thereby pushing all issues of difference into the private realm, while institutions are designed to be a fixed collectivity that tries to subsume the untamed, 'impure' heterogeneity under the political (in the sense of institutional), so understood as the wise direction of elites (Rancière 2014). In his view, liberalism seeks to contain differences and to resolve conflicts in order to eliminate the politics of surprise, which means stopping the emergence of the unexpected and the unprecedented (Chambers 2013). In the Rancièrian view, however, all systematic political orders, including the liberal one, are orders of the police, while politics, properly understood, disrupts the

police order by demanding equality. Domination in whatever form is unavoidable, and so Rancière is interested in the question of how genuine equality arises from that perpetual state. The post-foundationalist dimension of his perspective is visible in the constitutive function that he ascribes to the logics of both police and politics, arguing that any semi-foundations, such as the idea of ‘society’, is already ‘an (oligarchic) imaginary’ (Rancière 2014, 52), meaning that politics is an interruption of that semi-foundation. Ultimately, democracy cannot be understood as any set of government practices and institutions. Instead, it is the ‘political, public sphere in which problems are taken out from the private sphere and universalized’, in a ‘continuous process to enlarge the public sphere’ (Rancière 2014).

By contrast, Chantal Mouffe is perhaps one of the most significant proponents of liberal institutions in radical theory. Her argument regarding the ‘democratic paradox’ opposes liberalism with popular sovereignty, but she argues for the need to achieve a balance between the two, as she upholds the role of institutions and the liberal principle of safeguarding private rights in the fight for more equality (Mouffe 2009; 1992). For Mouffe, popular sovereignty and private rights have to be incorporated into a pluralist radical democracy that posits the liberty of individuals and the emancipating promise of politics (Mouffe 1992). She writes, that ‘it is high time to adhere to Norberto Bobbio’s long-held conviction that liberal democratic institutions should be an essential part of any democratization process, and that socialist goals can only be achieved in any acceptable way within a liberal democratic regime’ (Mouffe 1992, 2). In her later book on agonistic politics, which is the framework in which she develops for democratic theory, Mouffe directly criticizes Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri for their abandonment of political institutions, and instead argues for engaging with representative democracy through antagonistic hegemonic struggle (Mouffe 2013). Her defence of the representative system is based on the post-foundationalist conception of representation, and the irreducible pluralism and heterogeneity of society, without a positive identity within which to incorporate these differences (Mouffe 2013). Mouffe upholds that the construction of a temporary unity of a society requires hegemony, which is central to the discussion about the difference between Laclau and Lefort in the next section. But for the present discussion, it is important to emphasize the role she ascribes to representative political institutions in her agonistic model of democracy.

However, while representative institutions are integral to Mouffe’s framework, she appears to identify them exclusively with liberalism and the modern state system. Like Laclau, Mouffe does not ascribe any distinct position to representative institutions – they are and can only be a part of a particular hegemonic formulation of society. In her latest book *On Left Populism*, Mouffe restates her argument about the irreducible tension between democracy and liberalism which is to be negotiated through the hegemonic articulation of identity, and writes:

the previous considerations only concern liberal democracy envisaged as a political regime, but it is evident that those political institutions never exist independently of their inscription in an economic system. In the case of neoliberalism, for instance, we are dealing with a social formation that articulates a particular form of liberal democracy with financial capitalism. (Mouffe 2018, 23)

Though she does not reject liberalism, she is highly critical of its modern and most dominant interpretation, which she describes in a ‘post-political’ manner as attempting to erase any ideological differences in the name of ostensible consensus (Mouffe 2018, 23–24). As she already argued in the *Democratic Paradox*, this type of centrist politics empties the meaning of political institutions and results in the much-lauded ‘democratic deficit’ of Western liberal democracies. Neoliberal hegemony has led to a situation where elections no longer offer any opportunity to decide on real alternatives through the traditional ‘parties of government’ (Mouffe 2018, 24). In this predominance of centre-right or centre-left as the only alternatives, populist political parties that aim to challenge the existing neoliberal hegemony are decried as extremist (Mouffe 2018). So, Mouffe’s argument seems to suggest that even on an analytical level, institutions and liberalism are not antithetical to democracy. Rather, at the present moment of history, existing representative institutions are more or less useless for genuinely democratic politics. Ultimately, Mouffe’s approach to political institutions and democracy is guided by the framework of hegemony and antagonism. The next, and last, section of his chapter discusses whether this framework is indeed the most engaging and productive way to understand representative institutions in radical democratic theory.

3.6. The Role of Representative Institutions in Radical Democratic Theory: Comparing Laclau and Lefort

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s work has been defined by dealing with the legacy of Marxist theory and de-essentializing its key notions such as ‘class interests’. Post-Marxist and poststructuralist theory, as developed by Laclau and Mouffe, has criticized the foundationalist underpinnings of the socialist paradigm that exempts the formation of interests from politics, by defining them in an objective and transcendental way (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). From this perspective, the constitutive dimension of politics is defined by the issue of political inclusion and participation, of whether the available political subjectivities do indeed represent the voices that exist ‘out there’. Herein, the principal task of political practice is to constitute new political identities by giving voice to previously invisible demands (Laclau 2005). This process occurs as a response to existing, hegemonic political institutions and practices that have reified certain political viewpoints, making the focus of democratic struggle the social and civic spaces instead of the arena of nominal politics (Trend 1996, 15). In this case, the constitutive feature of politics is linked with politicizing aspects of life that

previously were not viewed as such, thus opening new avenues for political participation and equality. Laclau and Mouffe's work illustrates that one of the key goals of radical democratic theory is to extend equality and emancipation, as connected to its Marxist legacy.

Yet while Laclau is known for his work on political movements and mobilization, his work establishes a general logic of the political institution of the social that affirms the contingent nature of the social world (Critchley and Marchart 2004). For Laclau, the notion of antagonism works as an ontological category; specifically, as a process in which a consistent meaning is established (Marchart 2022). For Laclau, the basic elements of the social are differences, in a sense that there are no 'positivities', or things whose existence would be self-evident and self-sufficient (Laclau 1990, 4, 17–18). Drawing on the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Laclau starts by treating difference as a primary element of the social to show how any positive identity can only be constructed as a relation between differences (Laclau 2005, 97; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In Laclau's terms, the frontier wherein identity is constituted is a radical 'outside' or antagonism, while the common identification of differences, wherein they do not lose their differential content, refers to the logic of equivalence. Antagonism and the logic of equivalence are both part of a hegemonic operation that stabilizes a coherent identity in a field of pure differences (Laclau 2005, chap. 4). Stabilization occurs through discourse – a relational set of signifiers that defines a particular identity – and subjectivity and is constantly being renegotiated (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, chap. 2,3; Laclau 2005, chap. 4). The construction of discourse is a political move, an act of proclaiming power because it selects and invests meaning into an otherwise contingent set of social elements. In Laclau's post-structuralist perspective, language is not a medium through which an objective reality can be expressed, but rather constitutive of social reality as such: it assigns meanings to objects and introduces them to a socially shared context (Laclau 2006b). Thus, Laclau's ontology of the political also concerns the ontology of the social – which he views in political terms (Marchart 2014).

In politics, the notions of hegemony and antagonism are important for producing unity and a collective sense of positive identity, which Laclau assigns to the construction of 'empty signifiers' (Laclau 2006b, chap. 3; 2006a). In Laclau's post-foundationalist perspective, it is not possible to have any underlying universal principles upon which society is ordered, but certain key notions like 'unity', 'freedom' or indeed 'order' themselves become focal points through which representations of society are constituted in the field of negativities (Laclau 2006b, chap. 3). Neither of these notions can actually achieve the total constitution of society, but attempt to fill this lack of total identity through discursive articulations. Laclau (2006b, 44) writes:

To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function. (We have spoken about ‘order’, but obviously ‘unity’, ‘liberation’, ‘revolution’, etcetera belong to the same order of things. Any term which, in a certain political context becomes the signifier of the lack, plays the same role. Politics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers.)

For Laclau, ‘universality’ is ‘an empty horizon of the social, necessary dimension of all social and political action, which however will never be entirely filled up by a given particularism even though particular forces strive to incarnate it’ (Critchley and Marchart 2004, 6–7). Any social fact and relationship in the Laclauian sense is constituted through a hegemonic operation, where a particular signifier stands in for the universal (Laclau 2006a). Hegemony thus postulates the approach of how to ‘save’ universality while recognizing its impossibility as a ‘genuine’ fact.

Now, Laclau has connected his theory of hegemony with democratic politics, noting that modern democracy begins wherein the constitutive gap between the ‘empty signifier’ and its many possible representations is acknowledged (Laclau 2006b, 46). While Laclau has been criticized for the normative void of his perspective, as discussed above, other scholars like Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart have argued that Laclau’s post-foundationalist view on democratic politics does indeed have an ethical dimension (Critchley 2004; Marchart 2019). Instead of being situated as simply a power-play, hegemony has to be connected with the self-recognition of actors taking part in the hegemonic struggle and the acknowledgement of the contingency of their projects (Critchley 2004, 114–15). However, Critchley admits that Laclau’s own statements about the ethos and democratic normativity of his framework have been ambiguous (117). One important aspect in assessing Laclau’s own approach is the opposition he makes between institutionalized politics and ‘proper’ democratic politics, which happens outside the ordinary institutional political arena. Laclau, just like Mouffe, has been very critical of neoliberal hegemony in existing liberal democracies, which has meant giving more emphasis to the counterhegemonic logic of equivalence. Thus, he privileges the logic associated with articulating new subjectivities in the political sphere (Laclau 2005, 225–27). His earlier work included discussions of democratic practices in both institutional and extra-institutional terrains, and it is only in *On Populist Reason* where he describes the institutional terrain as a realm of ‘pure administration’ (Howarth and Norval 2016, 309). To understand Laclau’s linking of democracy with the logic of difference and equivalence, it would be worthwhile to review his discussion of Lefort, which will be enumerated below.

Still, while Laclau has focused on the mobilization of social movements at the expense of attention to political institutions, this does not mean that his theory inherently entails a contradiction between the two. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe’s framework has been criticised for their overall reliance on the state and the traditional liberal system. From the point of view of the radical left, the hegemonic transformation which they theorize has not brought about any substantial

change and has instead only benefited the liberal state (Day 2004). Such a critique also contests that they place too much focus on leadership and the verticality of power which has impeded, rather than helped, the mobilization of social movements (Jäger and Borriello 2019). From a deliberative democracy point of view, Mouffe still relies on universalizing categories of reason and deliberation as a process that can ensure the agonistic hegemonic struggles she envisages (Knops 2007). So, for many scholars, Laclau and Mouffe appear to be insufficiently radical in their approach to representative democracy and political institutions. However, in this section and chapter, the issue I address is different, as it concerns the argument of hegemony and the ‘empty signifiers’ of constituting ‘unity’ in the post-foundationalist, non-essentialist way.

To counterpose Laclau’s reading of the construction of ‘unity’ with another post-foundationalist perspective, I draw on the work of Claude Lefort. Both Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, as well as Laclau’s subsequent book *On Populist Reason*, directly address Lefort’s arguments about power as the ‘empty place’ in democracy. Other scholars have also acknowledged the shared line of argument between this set of authors (Critchley 2004, 115; Marchart 2007, 158).

In Lefort’s analysis, democracy emerges as a regime that bears a specific relation to modernity, which entails certain normative implications. Modern democracy is a form of society that has lost ‘markers of certainty’ by losing established points of power: from the king, both a transcendental and concrete figure, power has shifted to ‘the people’, a symbolic but empty, indefinable locus of power (Lefort 1988, 17–18). In a monarchy, the social body is held together by the visible figure of the monarch, and all the different spheres of life are ordered in relation to his power as a source of meaning. By contrast, in democracy, this embodied source of meaning is lost, and different spheres of the social become autonomous and independent. However, the social body can still be unified through the figure of the ‘people’. Yet it is an ‘empty place’ of power, because just by virtue of institutions existing, it is impossible for the people to be embodied in a single and concrete way. The empty place is always contested; however, the social can always be unified through a reference to ‘the people’. For Lefort, this makes democracy the most apt regime for the condition of permanent uncertainty, and for this reason, emptiness should be preserved. When the empty place becomes co-substantial with any concrete political actor, however, the point of democracy as a regime is lost, and it transforms into a totalitarian regime instead (Lefort 1988, 19–20).

Lefort embedded his framework in theorizing the transformation from the *Ancien Régime* to democracy in the context of France. His focus was to describe the change that occurred when the theological conception of power that characterized monarchical regimes transformed into a secular, democratic conception of power. In Lefort’s terms of the symbolic function of power, modern democracy is a historically unique regime because it is a form of society where no one stands in the constitutive ‘outside’—neither God nor the City, as in ancient democratic societies. There is no positive source from which absolute law and knowledge

can be ‘incarnated’ and manifested in the government; instead, it is the ‘empty place’, the negative conception of power, where it is claimed and exercised by groups and individuals through political institutions, but which itself always remains empty. At the same time, power does not simply reside with those individuals and groups. Though thoroughly negative, its symbolic dimension institutes the social space that makes it possible to access in terms of competing claims.

Laclau and Mouffe agree with Lefort’s reading of the institution of democracy and the notion of the ‘empty place’ that displaces the idea of a substantial unity of a society (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 316). Since there are no universal, transcendental foundations of society such as religion, the unity of society has to be instituted in a hegemonic way (317). They acknowledge that attempts to deny this lack of substantial unity are threatened by, in Lefort’s terms, totalitarianism as well as underline the risk of having no unity at all for political action (318–319). In this way, Laclau and Mouffe appropriate Lefort’s perspective in a sense that corresponds with their logic of equivalence and logic of difference.

In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau recognizes the post-foundationalist perspective regarding the absent grounds of society that he and Mouffe share with Lefort but he is much more critical of Lefort’s notion of the ‘empty’ place of power (Laclau 2005, 224–34). Laclau’s greatest problem is that he is unable to fit the equivalential logic with Lefort’s notion of the ‘empty place’ of power. As Laclau admits, several of Lefort’s arguments about totalitarianism would fit with his own theorization of populism (226). Lefort opposes democracy with totalitarianism, where the latter is defined by the claim of embodying the power of ‘people-as-one’ (226). For Laclau, despite a non-essentialist approach to constructing ‘the people’, such a claim is central to the populist, counterhegemonic operation (226). One should note that while in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe link democracy with a recognition of contingency and incompleteness, in his work on populism, Laclau does not put emphasis on such a normative argument. In his words, some hegemonic projects might be totalitarian, but this does not mean that all populist projects would be so (226–227). Laclau emphasizes a key difference with Lefort’s understanding of the term ‘empty’: while empty signifiers constitute political identities by making particular positions symbolize unity, power itself cannot really be totally empty in the way Lefort describes it (227). Laclau (2005, 227) writes:

For me, emptiness is a type of identity, not a structural location. [...] Between total embodiment and total emptiness, there is a gradation of situations involving partial embodiments. These partial embodiments are, precisely, the forms taken by hegemonic practices.

The problem that Laclau identifies with Lefort is the latter’s implicit embrace of only liberal democracy, without acknowledging the other logic, if we are reminded of Mouffe’s ‘democratic paradox’ of equality and popular sovereignty (Laclau 2005, 227–28). Laclau agrees with Mouffe that democracy is constituted in a

contingent articulation between the two traditions of safeguarding rights or equality and argues that Lefort's framework accounts only for the exercise of individual rights and other liberal discourse elements (227–228). Therefore, since democratic politics is inherently an ongoing process of hegemonic articulations, some 'empty' place of power, namely, a place of supposed neutrality beyond the two traditions of democracy and liberalism, cannot really be imagined.

While Lefort has not directly addressed the opposition between democracy and liberalism to which Laclau refers, other scholars have directly opposed liberal democracy and populism from a Lefortian perspective (Abts and Rummens 2007). Instead of accepting the two different strands of the logics of constitutional rights and of popular sovereignty, Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens propose a three-fold logic, which draws on Lefort's model (Abts and Rummens 2007, 406). Instead of a hegemonic struggle between individual rights and emancipation, they maintain that democracy has its own particular logic that requires the place of power to remain empty (413). Abts and Rummens also show how Lefort's framework cannot be reduced to liberal democracy alone, since it does not define unity as the simple aggregation of private interests; in fact, the absolute dominance of this view would be undemocratic for Lefort (413). Subsequently, Lefort's argument about totalitarianism concerns the claim of a fully transparent, 'people-as-one' unity, which is the other pole of an undemocratic mutation. Therefore, democracy occupies a place that cannot be reduced to either emancipation or private rights, with Lefort's model transcending the logic of the 'democratic paradox'. In a different article, Rummens compares Laclau and Mouffe with Lefort to show how the hegemonic framework fails to provide democratic unity, since the 'embodiment of the locus of power is an all or nothing affair. Because the victors of such a struggle ("plebs") identify themselves with the people-as-a-whole ("populus"), the losers are delegitimized as representatives of the people' (Rummens 2008, 381). He continues by stating that for Lefort, liberalism and democracy are conceptually connected, not contradictory as they are for Mouffe (381), but he does not mention the 'third logic' of democracy as distinct from any other dimension. In my view, however, it is important to keep the argument about a distinctly democratic logic in mind and relate it to the role of representative institutions.

Though Abts and Rummens argue for the distinction between populism, liberalism and democracy, I propose that the notion of a 'third position' of power is more useful for characterizing Lefort's post-foundationalist view on representation (Flynn 2005; 2012; 2019). As argued by Bernard Flynn, this other – third – position outside of the central conflict between rulers and ruled gives society a united image of itself; without its own representation, power would be blind (Flynn 2019, 69). For Lefort, the possibility of a society arises from the need to establish unity in the natural condition of conflict between rulers and the ruled, a position in line with Niccolò Machiavelli (Lefort 2012; Flynn 2019, 68–71), and one that echoes Rancière's logic of domination. Yet, in contrast to the two logics – the incompatible, independent desire to rule and not be ruled – a 'third' position also emerges: that of power (Flynn 2019, 69–70). Situating power is an

act of instituting borders through which society can recognize itself as one and the same through all of its multiple dimensions, thereby creating a place from which society ‘can be seen, read and named’ (Lefort 1988, 225). By place of power, Lefort means the self-representation of what can be understood as an authority, such as the king or ‘the people’.

Flynn contrasts Lefort’s reading of power as a place of authority to that of Michel Foucault – a comparison that, in my view, is also useful with respect to Laclau. For Foucault, just like Laclau, no institution of the political could be just that – that is, a representation of unity through a symbolic figure of authority. Instead, ‘for Foucault, the representation of the king’s body is not the source of his power, rather its mask. The figure of the sovereign and the law occult the true operations of power’ (Flynn 2019, 73). The place of power cannot be empty – it either hides the actual operations of power as it does for Foucault or is embodied as a collective identity through a particular identity as it is for Laclau. In Lefort’s account, the institution of power does not have content in itself, but rather institutes the possibility of even accessing ‘society’ as a unified field (Lefort 1988, 18). The more concrete form of power, the quasi-representation of the place of power, follows this act of instating unity and is a subject to historical transformations and particular articulations (18).

Whether it is the King or the People, institutions are the symbolic figures of this act of instituting society as a unity. The difference in modern democracy is that the symbolic nature of the people is obscured, and politics appears to simply be simply an exchange of power at the visible level. As Lefort writes: ‘this, then, is the paradox: regimes in which the figure of power stands out against another force do not completely obscure the political principle behind the social order’ (Lefort 1988, 228). In democracy, political institutions maintain a distance between any concrete group or individual claim to power and their being substantial with the people or the nation and the state (Lefort 1988, 17–18). In this way, democratic institutions, which are representative by definition, maintain the visibility of the symbolic principle of political institution. Therefore, representative institutions in Lefort’s account are not simply identical to liberal democracy, as Laclau argues, but rather fulfil an extremely crucial role.

This important and normative feature of Lefort’s theory of democracy is, on the one hand, very visible and seemingly clear. On the other hand, I hope that I have shown in this chapter that neither constructivist approaches to political representation, representation-orientated democratic theory nor post-foundationalist radical democratic perspectives have marked the role of representative institutions in the way that Lefort does. In radical perspectives, this is likely related to making the link between institutions and inequality. Yet, neoliberal hegemony and liberal democracy are not identical representative institutions. This does not mean that we should ignore existing issues with representative institutions that are embedded in the liberal democratic framework for a large part of the world. Representative institutions can evolve in different forms than those we currently have, as I will briefly discuss in the last chapter. The nature of this evolution falls beyond the scope of this thesis, which will continue with an

analysis of the perception of very traditional liberal institutions such as parliament, political parties and government in Latvia. However, in the following analysis, my goal is to illustrate the value of Lefort's much broader notion of representative institutions, and the way they interplay with the actual construction of democratic identity in Latvia. As the next chapter will establish, Laclau's framework of populist collective mobilization encounters limitations that can be addressed with Lefort's perspective on the institution of democracy.

3.7. Conclusions

This chapter presented a broad overview of the theoretical debate concerning democratic representation and the role of representative institutions within it. It briefly captured the difficulties that political science research on political behaviour encounters in measuring citizens' support for political institutions. It reviewed approaches in democratic theory that criticize simplistic assumptions about representative institutions and emphasized the constitutive effects of political representation. At its core, however, the chapter focused on radical democratic perspectives that pose the issue of the ontological dimension of representation and how they have opened new ways to think about politics as the field that structures social reality itself. One of the key contributions that radical democratic theory has brought to the table is the de-essentialization of the principal political categories such as authority, power, society, and others. The deconstruction of these categories has opened new ways of thinking about age-old political questions such as how we define government, authority, and its legitimacy. Radical democrats hold that there are no grounds upon which these categories can be permanently based or the general principles of their definition be discovered. However, some have called into question the usefulness of radical perspectives for mainstream democratic theory due to their (perceived) relativism, lack of normativity and other similar reasons.

In the chapter, I looked in greater depth at several authors such as Rancière, Mouffe, Laclau, and Lefort. Rancière and Mouffe have been more explicit in their take on liberal democratic institutions, and present two quite opposite views – even though they share the idea of conflict and plurality as the basic condition of the social. For Mouffe, liberal institutions are guarantees of preserving individual differences through the notion of rights and freedoms, while Rancière is explicit that the inherent logic of any system of rule is to suppress the capacity for equality. Yet, despite Mouffe's more positive outlook on the liberal regime, for her, democratic politics means keeping the paradox between liberal values and popular sovereignty intact, while it has been skewed in favour of the former in contemporary societies. Meanwhile, Laclau does not focus on the restrictions and limits of democratic politics but on the capacity to create an equality that democratic politics should inherently have. In contrast to these approaches, for Lefort, democratic institutions are the very centre for keeping the place of power 'empty' – the determining feature of modern democracy. Lefort situates the tension between

different ideological interpretations, such as between liberalism and socialism, as second-level problems, placing foremost emphasis on institutions that disembody popular sovereignty as a structural condition for securing the democratic place of power.

My underlying interest in this theoretical discussion has been to build more bridges between the debate about political representation in democratic theory and radical perspectives. However, this interest was not framed in terms of finding compromises between liberal and radical theory, but rather with re-assessing an independent, radical meaning of representative institutions. Lefort has already done work in this direction, but his account on the role of representative institutions is not a mainstream view in radical theory. By comparing Laclau and Lefort, I sought to bring out the defining dimensions of Lefort's conception, and its value for radically theorizing democracy. The next step of this task will be the empirical analysis, where I show how the prevailing radical view on institutions, as illustrated by Laclau, can be limited when applied to a particular context.

4. Latvia: Democracy, Unity and Representation

4.1. Introduction

The present chapter will explain in greater detail the issue of low support for representative institutions in Latvia and reframe it in terms of radical democratic theory. It will apply Laclau's theoretical framework of populism to analyse the construction of democratic identity in Latvia and then draw on Lefort's notion of power to identify the limitations of Laclau's theory in order to advance the discussion. At first glance, Laclau's definition of ethnopopulism, which I will describe in section 4.3., seems to apply very well to Latvia – discourse on 'the people' is characterized by continual references to 'unity', ethnocultural markers like language as well as an overall focus on the specific cultural community. For Laclau, this form of populism is problematic since it does not construct new political subjectivities within the community, but rather on its 'outside' – usually against the ethnic 'other', which includes internal ethnic minorities.

Though I would accept such a reading on the construction of popular identity in Latvia, there is nevertheless a very significant qualifier – the role of political institutions. For most of the post-1991 independence period, trust in traditional representative institutions such as parliament has remained relatively low. The available survey data is confirmed by the results of my own discourse analysis, which will be presented in the next chapter. Latvian discourses depict political representatives as corrupt, self-interested and uncaring about the needs of the people. In Laclau's framework, such discourse would indicate a counterhegemonic challenge, since the antagonistic border is drawn within the community, but this is not really the case. Instead, I argue that 'unity' itself has been the central element of articulations of 'the people'. This articulation continues to be at odds with political institutions, which, to bring Lefort into the picture, by definition constitute a division in the self-representation of society. For Laclau, institutions can only be part of a hegemonic order, and his framework does not help to understand how hegemonic ethnopopulist discourse in Latvia can continually oppose the state, insofar as it is identified with the same ethnocultural community. For there to be an actual counterhegemonic project, the government has to either become primarily associated with the ethnic 'other' (as it was, for instance, during the time of the Soviet Union), or an articulation of new signifiers that are not exclusively ethnocultural.

My discourse analysis of the notion of 'democracy' in Latvia shows that its ideal model appears to be that of unmediated actions by citizens such as referendums and signature collections which are seen as signifying the 'unity' of 'the people'. If this 'unity' were to primarily become associated with a hegemonic national project, it would be possible to describe it as ethnopopulism in Laclau's terms. However, as my analysis will show, in the contemporary discourse on 'democracy', political actors do not claim to be speaking in the name of 'the people' and do not claim to embody national 'unity' – which would be a pre-

condition for creating a hegemonic claim in Laclau's categories. Instead, they position their claims as being supportive and embracing of 'democracy' as a direct expression of the power of 'the people' – or they frame such rhetoric as a populist attack on the principle of representative democracy. This is where Lefort's identification of democracy with representative institutions matters. This is because while the basic condition of democracy in the Lefortian sense – the institutionalization of conflict as an ontological category – remains, the appeals to 'unity' in the Latvian context have not turned into an anti-democratic hegemonic project of the 'people-as-one'. The conflict between different actors remains a focal point of democracy, instead of a particular actor claiming to embody the presence of 'the people'. Rather, such 'presence' is widely ascribed to referendums, signature collections and other such events that are seen as representing the unity of 'the people', instead of political actors. The conflict between different actors, whatever their political projects are, retains the Lefortian notion of the democratic place of power, and no actor has so far explicitly tried to reject this condition¹. Nevertheless, these two self-representations of power in Latvia are at odds, and the prevailing idea of democratic identity as an unmediated unity helps to better understand the continuous negative perceptions of representative institutions in Latvia.

The following chapters will unfold this argument empirically. The present chapter is dedicated to providing the background regarding political attitudes and participation in Latvia, with a specific focus on the popularity of direct democracy initiatives – a phenomenon that has received less scholarly attention in mainstream comparative politics. I then further elaborate the radical democratic perspective on issues concerning representative democracy in Latvia, by introducing and critically assessing Laclau's reading of ethnopopulism in Eastern Europe. I then discuss Lefort's view on representative institutions and how his arguments about the democratic place of power can help to normatively assess the democratic potential and current limitations of Latvia's case. After situating the empirical argument in the discussion about the normative role of institutions in radical democratic theory, the last section of the chapter will establish the methodology of the empirical research. By using discourse analysis and secondary literature, the next two chapters substantiate and elaborate the empirical argument of Latvian democratic construction presented in this chapter, covering a period from the first national movement in 19th century up until contemporary debates.

¹ There were exceptions to this trend in the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections, but not with any substantial success. This development will be discussed in the last chapter.

4.2. Political Attitudes and Participation in Latvia

The lack of substantial ties between the wider society and the political class has been very marked in Latvia, with people exhibiting exceptionally low levels of confidence in the parliament and political parties – the key representative institutions of Latvia’s parliamentary democracy. As was discussed in the 2nd chapter, these long term trends have been explained in terms of the lack the political performance of institutions, corruption scandals, economic trends, and weak civil ties. At the same time, political attitudes have exhibited very little variation over time, posing a question of whether the negatively ‘ingrained’ perception of politics is a result of temporary developments, or, indeed, a sign of non-pluralistic, illiberal political culture.

Trust in parliament reached its highest point of 40% in the early 1990s, soon after Latvia regained its independence, but a significant decrease already began in the second half of 1990s and through the 2000s, hitting as low as 10% in 2007 and dropping even further in 2008 (Diagram 1). After the economic crisis between 2008–2011, 2012 saw trust in parliament reach around 20% (see Diagram 2), a level which has remained stable ever since (Diagram 2). The government sees a higher degree of trust– at its highest, it stood at around 30% – while political parties see the lowest degree of trust – less than 10% for a number of years (Diagram 2). The legal system and public administration do not fare much better. The period of 2007 – 2012 indicates that the economic crisis of 2009 arguably impacted all levels of political trust. However, levels of trust were already steadily decreasing in Latvia from 2005 to 2007, a period that experienced the highest economic growth of the post-independence era, indicating that the reasons for political support stem beyond the economic sphere.

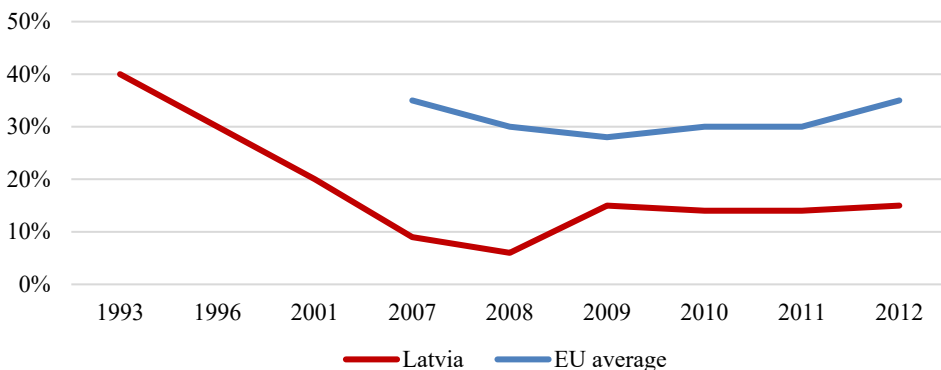


Diagram 1. Trust in the national parliament in Latvia (1993–2012)

Sources: adapted from Auers, D. (2015) *Comparative Politics and government of the Baltic states*, (sources: New Baltic Barometer (1993, 1995, 2001); Eurobarometer (2008–2013)), p.124.

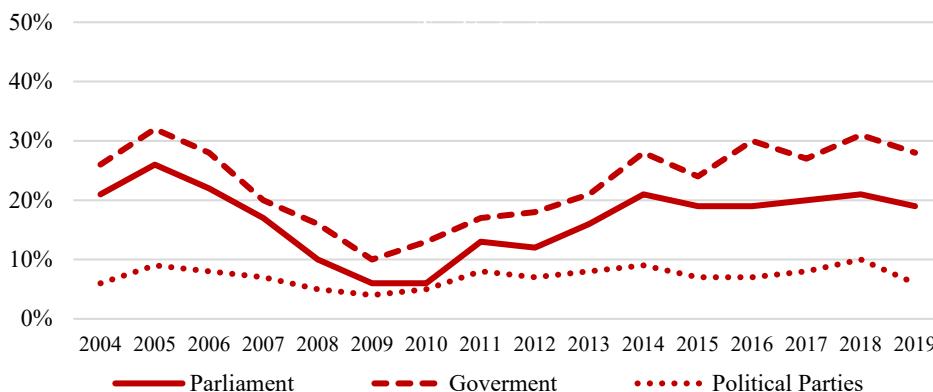


Diagram 2. Trust in the national parliament, government, and political parties in Latvia (2004–2019)

Source: Eurobarometer Interactive

Latvia has the lowest proportion of people – less than 1% of the population – who belong to a political party (Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012, 28); in 2017, the figure stood at 1.1%, whereas it was 4.3% in Estonia and 4.1% in Lithuania (Klūga, 02.01.2017). Also, participation in civil and non-governmental associations is markedly low (Ijabs 2014a, 221). Surveys have shown that this civic passivity can be understood in the context of the lack of belief that the government takes public opinion into account and that one can do something if the government makes decisions which are inconsistent with the public interest (support for these statements has only decreased over the years) (Table 1). Yet, in 2014, 60.7 % of survey respondents supported the following statement: ‘some strong leaders will do more for the good of our country than all laws and negotiations’ and 81.2% expressed support for the idea that ‘people, who assume important public posts, usually are thinking of their own rather than the public good’ (Table 1). From the survey data, the picture emerges that the people of Latvia generally and persistently harbour a low degree of trust in key representative institutions – the parliament, the government, and especially political parties. Thus, the negative perception of institutions seems to stem from a more foundational level, not merely evaluations of particular governments and decisions.

Table 1. Attitudes towards the state and political participation in Latvia

Agree with the statement	2004	2014	Change
Overall, the government is taking into account public opinion	31.7	17.0	-14.7
People, who assume important public posts, usually are thinking of their own rather than the public good	87.8	81.2	-6.6
Some strong leaders will do more for the good of our country than all laws and negotiations	58.5	60.7	+2.2
Do you think that you would be able to do something if the government made decisions inconsistent with the public interests? (definitely would be able + maybe would be able)	26.1	21.5	-4.6
Do you think that you would be able to do something if local government institutions made decisions inconsistent with the public interests? (definitely would be able + maybe would be able)	40.7	29.4	-11.3

Adapted from: Ijabs, I. (2014) Political Participation. // How democratic is Latvia: audit of democracy 2005–2014 / University of Latvia, Advanced Social and Political Research Institute; scientific editor Juris Rozenvalds, p.228

When studying the above data, it is worth recalling the existing arguments concerning the low level of political trust in Latvia, also in comparison with Lithuania, which has similar trends, and with Estonia, where trust in institutions is higher. Ethnic belonging is not the most decisive factor in the perception of political institutions – in Latvia, the numbers are similar across ethnic divisions. Political and economic performance are two other important factors to consider. Regarding the latter, as indicated by the data above, the economic situation is not the most telling criterion concerning the confidence in institutions. What remains, then, is the political system and its performance: the exceptional case of Estonia, for instance, can be explained in terms of its faster and more radical public administration reforms as well as the higher stability of its political system (Gudžinskas 2017, 14; Ehin 2007, 16; Pettai, Auers, and Ramonaitė n.d.). This has made the level of corruption and the role of informal political networks lower in Estonia and created stronger links between the citizens and the political parties.

Meanwhile, the low level political activism in Latvia can be explained by the society's perception of politicians' lack of responsiveness and performance (Mieraņa 2014, 15). Among the persistent beliefs in Latvian society, one sees the idea that political parties and politicians are selfish and corrupt, that they are only interested in fulfilling their own personal interests, and that the people lack any actual power to change things (Dreifelds 1996, 14; Karklins and Zepa 2001, 338; Eglitis and Ardava 2012, 1046). Though the factors explaining the low political trust, such as the perception of political corruption and the lack of responsiveness and accountability in political representatives, are certainly telling, the reasons

why these dynamics are not challenged during a normal representative process are less clear. The institutional checks and balances of democracy in Latvia are recognized as normal, meaning there are no substantial restriction for citizens' freedom to exercise their constitutional rights. The electoral turnout in Latvia has been decreasing, but it echoes certain similar trends in the region overall. The number of citizens belonging to political parties is exceptionally low in Latvia, which illustrates the fact that institutional participation in politics seems not to be an option for a significant part of the population. Civic participation through non-governmental and interest group organizations is not a substantive alternative to political participation. Despite peoples' participation in elections and opportunities for engaging with political processes, trust in representative institutions remains very low. In this regard, the issue of political party membership is especially symptomatic – trust in parties has been so poor that citizens have no stake in becoming more involved themselves. It is not hard to get into a club, which is not that popular. The criteria for forming a political party are quite simple in Latvia, yet party membership remains low. Despite the high level of dissatisfaction with political representatives, people have little initiative to add to the political decision-making from within the representative system. This is the type of 'vicious circle', from which an exit often acquires a culturally-deterministic tone – it's the soviet mentality, the lack of liberal democratic values and education, and other such reasons that are sought to explain the passivity.

One dimension of Latvian politics that has been less emphasized in this debate, however, are the various direct democracy measures that have been actively used since the 1990s re-independence. Because the use of these measures has not resulted in any substantial change in political attitudes, scholarly discussion about the role of direct democracy in Latvia has remained rather minimal. In the context of my study, the frequent calls for referendums, and the subsequent signature collections for their organization are taken to indicate a parallel conception of democratic sovereignty in Latvia. Though they are tools of representative democracy according to conventional understanding, these referendum campaigns have signified the protest of 'the people' against 'politicians' as competing self-representations of democratic power, as the discourse analysis in the 6th chapter will show. The interpretation of low political support and negative attitudes towards representative politics thus appear more complex than in the discussions about political attitudes outlined above. My study invites one to consider the discursive interpretation of democratic subjectivity in Latvia and the broader worldview in which such discursive elements as 'corruption', 'bad economy' or 'lack of performance' are situated.

Table 2. Constitutional provisions of a national referendum in Latvia

Right to initiate	Provision		
The parliament	Membership of Latvia in the EU	Changes of Latvia's membership in the EU	Changes of specific Constitution's articles
The president	Recalling of the parliament	Suspending the law – with the one-tenth of the electorate approval	
Citizens	Recalling of the parliament	Rejection by the parliament of the citizens' submitted draft law or constitutional amendment	

Source: Adapted from the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia

In total, thirteen referendums have been held in Latvia since the foundation of the republic in 1918. Four referendums took place before 1939, and of the nine referendums since 1991, six took place between 2000 and 2012. There have been seven constitutional referendum provisions: one concerns altering other specific constitutional provisions, and two concern making changes concerning Latvia's membership in the EU (Table 2). Of the remaining four, two provisions stipulate the right to recall parliament through referendums: the president and one-tenth of the electorate have the right to call for the dissolution of parliament and organize an extraordinary election. The last provision was included in the constitution in 2011, after the referendum in 2008 on the citizens' right to dissolve the parliament, which did not reach the necessary quorum. Nevertheless, the provision was included in the constitution some years later by parliament. Latvia is the only country in Europe where the parliament can be dissolved by a popular vote (Somers 2015). A different provision stipulates that the president can initiate the dissolution of parliament, but it has to be supported in a referendum by more than half of the voters. If the voters reject the dissolution of parliament, the president must be recalled. In a historical precedent in 2011, the incumbent parliament was dissolved through the referendum with 95% in favour, after the provision was used by then-president Valdis Zatlers.

Another referendum provision concerns the situation when the President uses their right to suspend the adoption of a law (Table 2). In this case, a signature collection is organized where at least one-tenth of the electorate has to approve submitting the law for a vote in the referendum. If the referendum is organized, citizens can reject the law with the quorum of the half who voted in the last parliamentary elections. This provision was used in 2007 with the President suspending the law on State Security. Finally, a referendum must be organized when the parliament rejects a legislative proposal submitted by one-tenth of the electorate. In 2000, citizens proposed a law against privatizing the national

electric company Latvenergo, and since it was adopted by the parliament without any amendments, the referendum did not take place.

The right to submit a legislative draft is yet another powerful tool of direct democracy, which has, however, undergone a significant change after 2012. The Constitution stipulates the right that not less than one-tenth of the electorate can submit a fully elaborated draft of a law or amendments to the Constitution. If rejected by the parliament or adopted with changes, it must be submitted to a referendum. Earlier, it was sufficient to submit 10 000 signatures to open a general signature collection, but the number was later increased threefold and added other limitations such as creating a political ‘initiative group’. These changes came as a response to the 2012 referendum for Russian to become the second state language – a proposal for constitutional amendments that grew from citizens’ legislative initiative. In this context, the threshold was too low for organizing a signature collection and referendum, and was subsequently changed. Signature collections before and after 2012 have generally had a hard time reaching the necessary threshold of signatures. The initiatives have mainly related to matters concerning ethnopolitics – in three instances, nationalist parties have used them to push for stricter citizenship and language policies.

In addition to constitutional rights, since 2011, the rules of parliament have included the right for 10 000 citizens to collect signatures and submit legislation initiatives to the parliament’s commissions. In the wake of increased restrictions for collecting signatures for the draft law or constitutional amendments, the founders of the online participation platform *Mana Balss (My Voice)* Jānis Erts and Kristofs Blua submitted this initiative in 2011 to the parliament, and it was adopted. Since then, there have been 2221 registered initiatives and 2 301 655 signatures, with 912 000 unique visitors and more than 1.4 mil views of the page (Mana Balss 2021). Eighty-four proposals have been submitted to the parliament and other relevant institutions, and 50 of them have been adopted, putting *Mana Balss* among the most successful of like platforms across the world (Mana Balss 2021). The topics of legislative proposals in *Mana Balss* cover an extensive base, and the organization of signature collections itself is more straightforward and requires less preparation than in the case of a constitutional provision. That could very well explain the shift to online citizen initiatives in Latvia that has seemed to take place since 2012.

Though there have been quite a few instances of direct democracy in Latvia, the prevailing scholarly perspective has tended to be critical of their successes. The argument is that while these instruments do exist, any ‘participatory culture’ that would make substantial use of them is considerably lacking (Somer 2015). Political parties are not able to mobilize the voters and/or are use referendums for narrow partisan goals (Somer 2015, 57; Auers 2012, 59) and the institutional requirements for citizens’ participation are still high (Somer 2015, 57). Of the nine post-independence referendums, four have failed to reach the quorum, and thus their results were deemed invalid – such was the case with the 2007 and 2008 referendums mentioned above, where the number of voters was 37.3% and 42% of the electorate, respectively. At the same time, six referendums have taken place

because their respective legislative initiatives collected a substantial amount of signatures – for instance, 14% and 14.6% of the electorate in 2007 and 2008, respectively. The initiative for the draft bill against the privatization of Latve-nergo in 2000, which was adopted by the parliament, was signed by 22.9% of the voters. In the 2011 referendum on the dissolution of Saeima, 44.7% of the electorate participated, 94.3% of which voted for recalling the parliament. These numbers do not represent a small part of the constituency, and do indicate a sustained level of participation, especially considering that in a period from 2007 to 2012, there were six referendums altogether. Most importantly, the number of initiatives and collected signatures both at the level of constitutional rights and as online initiatives indicate that direct democracy activities in Latvia are not a simply partisan tool, especially considering the low level of trust in political parties.

As discussed in the previous chapter, many authors with a representation-centric perspective on democratic theory do not view direct democracy as a panacea for the crisis of representative democracy. The case of Latvia demonstrates that the substantial use and interest in referendums along with citizens' legislative rights to directly participate in politics do not improve trust in the political system. At the same time, scholars who have spoken of a lack of 'participatory culture' or the partisan use of referendums do not fully account for the relative intensity of direct democracy in Latvia. In this dissertation, I view the references to direct democracy in Latvian discourses as an alternative constitution of the 'unity' of 'the people'. In chapter 6, I will analyse several of the debates concerning the referendums and signature collections mentioned above. This analysis will show that direct political participation is very much linked to national identity – but not to the representative system. In Lefort's terms, the place of power in Latvia is symbolized by political institutions, however, following Lefort further, they inherently divide 'the unity' of 'the people' which is projected onto the political sphere. In Latvian context, tools of direct democracy such as referendums and signature collection uphold this ideal of unity, which, as discourses reveal, is often opposed to the power embodied in representative institutions. Such opposition in discursive self-representation would make little sense in Laclau's framework, where counterhegemonic opposition towards 'the state' or 'elite' would mean an internal division in a community.

4.3. 'The People' vs. The Representation: Applying the Radical Democratic Perspective

In *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau writes the following about the case of Eastern Europe²:

(...) what we find that in Eastern Europe is an *ethnic* populism trying to enhance the particularism of the national values of specific communities [emphasis in original]. The statist dimension is not, of course, entirely absent, because there are clear attempts to constitute national states, but such a construction starts, in most cases, from the assertion of the specificity of a locally defined cultural group, which tends to exclude or drastically diminish the rights of other ethnic minorities (Laclau 2005, 193).

This description appears to be quite similar to the dominant reading of the limitations of Eastern European democracy which was critically surveyed in the second chapter. However, such an interpretation would not be correct – especially considering that for Laclau, populism is a positively evaluated logic of constructing political identities. The problem with Eastern Europe, then, is not that of populism, but rather that ethnic identification has displaced the, in Laclau's terms, antagonistic frontier between the state and 'the people'. This, in turn, has resulted in a particular difference of Eastern Europe, because while populism elsewhere has 'concerned the construction of an *internal* frontier in a *given* society' (Laclau 2005, 193)³, in Eastern Europe, the antagonistic frontier has been external and overwhelmingly between the nation and its ethnic outsiders (196). Eastern Europe signifies a tendency of embracing 'fully-fledged identities that can only reinforce their most reactionary tendencies and create the conditions for a permanent confrontation with other groups' (Laclau 2006, 100). Oliver Marchart gives some brief examples of Eastern Europe in a discussion about the normative underpinnings of Laclau's perspective on democracy (Marchart 2019, 160). The Eastern European context thus appears to be almost antithetical to the post-foundationalist conception of democracy, by striving towards the closure of a fully present, non-alienated ethnic Self.

To understand Laclau's argument more clearly, it is necessary to return to his theoretical considerations, this time regarding antagonism, hegemony, and populism in the context of liberal democratic history. Section 3.6 outlined the ontological premises of Laclau's perspective, the central element of which is the hegemonic logic that establishes an unfixing unity in a field of differences. It was also argued that in this mode of instituting the social, the right-wing interpretation of liberal democracy has become the hegemonic political tendency in post-WW2 Western states (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 160). It is important to clarify the

² In this context, Laclau gives the examples of Hungary and Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia.

³ Here and elsewhere, unless indicated otherwise, I keep the original emphasis in citations.

evolution of thinking about hegemony in Laclau's work, and how it impacts the direction he further pursues with his work on populism.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe embed the democratic logic of equality within the theological-political logic of hierarchy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 139), paralleling Lefort's analysis of the symbolic mutation of the figure of the King into that of 'the people', as outlined in section 3.6. The pre-democratic relations of subordination cannot be identified as such before the logic of equality enters into the mode of the social. Once it does, it displaces the holistic hierarchical mode with its (imaginary) external frontier and creates, very crucially, an internal frontier within the social (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 139). From then on, democratic logic allows for relations of subordination to be questioned by creating a number of antagonisms, which seek to extend egalitarianism and liberty throughout various spheres of life.

The internal frontier allows for the construction of political unity in the framework of the existing society – because it provides 'a discursive "exterior" from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 138). In contrast, in the inegalitarian system, the 'social body was conceived of as a whole in which individuals appeared fixed in differential positions' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 139). In their subsequent proposals for the reinvented Left, they argue that the liberal-conservative side has subsequently appropriated the democratic logic and its liberal underpinnings of equality and popular participation to stop the deepening of egalitarianism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 155–56).

In this historical context, however, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that there are no pre-determined agencies and identities ingrained in titular concepts such as the state and civil society, thereby leading them to abstain from making a determinate link between the state, liberalism and arresting equality (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 163–64). Even more importantly, it is not enough to merely challenge and reject subordination but to offer a positive sociality (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 173), essentially articulating an alternative hegemonic construction of the social. Laclau further specifies this in *On Populist Reason*, wherein he places the construction of 'the people' at the center of a new hegemony. 'The people' is not simply identical with civil society or anti-government mobilization as Laclau does not establish a priori categories for an analysis in this regard. In his framework, 'the people' becomes a signpost for the new internal frontier that creates a new and different logic of connecting differences, which can challenge the existing hegemony and push the extension of equality.

From Laclau's perspective, the significance of Eastern European populism is that instead of establishing an internal separation between 'the people' and the hegemonic centre, it draws an external border between 'the people' and its 'outsiders'. Laclau gives a historical account of the conditions of the emergence of ethnopopulism in Eastern Europe, wherein the presence of large ethnic minorities, 'a purely universalistic discourse was in most cases entirely farcical, and simply concealed the de facto concentration of power in the dominant ethnic

group' (Laclau 2005, 194). The cultural consciousness of these groups was formed in opposition to foreign powers who occupied their territory, where:

From this feeling of strong difference was born a self-consciousness which could only be 'demotic' because it could appeal neither to the state of the oppressors nor to the – nonexistent – one of the oppressed. So it was a consciousness based in their common language, in the ancestral religion, in the attachment to their land, in shared sufferings and rough treatment, as well as in the common condition of life [...]. (Hermet, 2001, as cited in Laclau 2005, 194–95).

The final stages of national identity formation took place in the hands of local secular intellectuals, in three moments, where Laclau quotes Guy Hermet: the first stage concerned the actualization of local art and culture, the second was the spread of national values to the local bourgeois circles, which started to oppose the cultural hegemony of the imperial centre (in Hermet's analysis Austria) and to defend the native language. Once the discourse spread to the masses, it became a political movement with a nationalist and populist program (Laclau 2005, 195).

On one level, Laclau characterizes the later stage of political identity construction in the region as typical of the hegemonic process, with communitarian space being articulated through the chain of equivalences and by defining an enemy. However, the crucial difference is that this type of populist logic is defined by an antagonistic 'outside' which was most often ascribed to immediate neighbours – often foreign invaders – and internal minorities, on the basis of their ethnic difference in relation to the community within. The fact that these are *internal* minorities does not mean that they are discursively accepted as internal to the community. In fact, they often constitute the ethnic 'Other' in the confines of the same society.

Eastern Europe was unique in how much it focused on the definition of external limits in constructing the communal subject, entrenching signifiers of the internal discursive space, and organizing all empty signifiers around the relations with external others. The emptiness of certain key signifiers is a central feature of politics for Laclau, since it is through such signifiers that it is possible to re-open a discursive space that a particular centre of power has so far fixed (Laclau 2006, chap. 3). The creation and extension of the chain of equivalences is a subsequent step of decentring certain empty signifiers – but because the internal signifiers are so fixed and all the focus is on the external borders of the self, as in the case of Eastern Europe, there is no room for the chain of equivalences to emerge. Populist mobilization requires the emergence of an alternative hegemonic centre, a centre that is capable of articulating a new way of organizing unity amidst social differences. But here, all the internal differences are already fixed vis-à-vis its external limits. Without the internal frontier, there is no distinction between *plebs* and *populus*, and the communitarian space is characterized by political uniformity and the logic of difference. In this case, difference means that each particular demand and position is treated as an individual instance in the framework of the nation as a whole, as opposed to, being connected with other

similar excluded demands (*plebs*) to oppose being excluded from the power (*populus*) – the general logic of Laclau’s populism (Laclau 2005, chaps. 4–5).

If we now return to the case of Latvia, most of Laclau’s analysis appears to fit very well. Hermet’s account of national identity formation, though written about the Austro-Hungarian Empire, closely resembles the evolution of Latvian cultural and political nationalism, as will be detailed in the next chapter. Laclau’s reading of Eastern European collective identity construction as limited in the openness of its internal empty signifiers helps to explain the lack of pluralism and the uniformity that defines ‘the people’ in Latvian discourse. Importantly, this reading does not treat ethnic identification as an innate psychological or cultural feature that escapes rationality: on the contrary, for Laclau, ‘ethnicity’ is a signifier that, in principle, has no determined relation to what is signified. The problematic aspect of community construction in Eastern Europe is how entrenched these signifiers of national community are. Though Laclau implies more than he argues it, the focus on the externality of the community space can be seen as related to the insecurity about the very existence of that identity. As will be visible later on, insecurity about national identity underscored the formation of Latvian national discourse, not only with respect to external threats but also to internal stability.

However, the argument about ethnopopulism in Eastern Europe only partly explains the construction or, more specifically, the reification of identity in Latvia. If the limits of the community are drawn vis-à-vis external, usually ethnically defined, outsiders, how can we understand the consistent anti-government rhetoric about the corruption of the entire political class and the continuous framing of ‘the people’ as the ‘underdog’ in Latvian discourses? Though Latvia has a significant internal ethnic minority of Russian-speakers, they do not often take the role of ‘outsiders’ to the ethnic Self in Latvian discourses on democracy, as we will see in the next chapter. Instead, the main ‘Other’ to the self-representation of democratic identity are politicians and political parties, which, importantly, are not identified as an ethnic ‘Other’. Internal antagonism would require a chain of equivalence that would disrupt the uniformity of identity by destabilizing its key signifiers – which is not the case in Latvia, as my empirical analysis illustrates. Instead, in the Latvian case, the constitutive frontier stands outside of the community, but it excludes not just ‘non-Latvian’ identities but also political parties and politicians – the representatives of ‘the people’. The particular relationship between ‘the people’ and political representatives in Latvia thus highlights important limitations to the Laclauian perspective, by demonstrating the construction of a popular identity that does not easily fit within his framework of hegemony and antagonism being part of democratic politics.

Claude Lefort’s post-foundationalist approach to the place of power and the role of institutions offers a different angle for understanding the self-representations of Latvian democracy. One of Lefort’s key insights is that regime classifications, like democracy or monarchy, are more than descriptions of the division of power: they organize society as a whole in its multiple dimensions (Lefort 1988, 18, 225). The unique feature of democracy is that for the first time, ‘none’ stands outside the whole of society, meaning there is no absolute source of

authority to be ‘incarnated’, as occurred in a monarchy, where the metaphysical power of God was politically embodied in the King (225). This is why the democratic place of power appears to be empty, and why the embodiment of ‘the people’, though motivated by a strong desire to reject that emptiness, is always out of reach. Only, and this is Lefort’s key normative concern, totalitarian projects claim to have finally escaped the uncertainty of the democratic place of power and achieved the closure between the fantasy and reality of ‘the people – as one’ (233).

Lefort and Laclau share the view that social orders have no centre, and democracy is defined by its negativity. Laclau’s notion of hegemony means that a unity can and must be constructed through a particular identity which is articulated through an empty signifier. As Laclau emphasizes in comparing his perspective with that of Lefort, the symbolizing power of identity can never really be empty – only articulated through partial embodiments (Laclau 2005, 227). For Lefort, this is not possible since individuals and groups cannot become co-substantial with the democratic place of power: which ‘cannot be represented’ (Lefort 1988, 17). Indeed, for Lefort, as noted by Laclau, it is a ‘structural location’ (Laclau 2005, 227) – the ‘third place’ of power that institutes the unity of the social sphere, without expressing any ontic content itself. And in democracy, this ‘third place’ is constituted by representative institutions. It might appear that the institutional apparatus, as Lefort construes it, fulfils the function of partially fulfilling power, but that is not the case – its goal is purely negative: to prevent ‘governments from appropriating power for their own ends, from incorporating it into themselves’ (Lefort 1988, 17). Thus, the representative mechanism of democracy – the institutionalization of conflict – is integral for safeguarding the lack in the constitution of the social, which is an insight that radical democrats do not emphasize enough. As discussed in the 3rd chapter, for Laclau, Lefort’s perspective directly contradicts his theory of hegemony and empty signifiers (Laclau 2007, 166).

From Lefort’s view of representative institutions and the locus of power, the tension between the Latvian public and government appears under a different light. In this case, the distrust of government and rejection of party politics can be understood as a rejection of representation at the symbolic level of self-constitution. The institutional apparatus unavoidably institutes the symbolic gap within the desire to become ‘the people-as-one’, while in Latvian discourses, ‘the people’ are always represented as being external to any social split and defined by unity. Lefort has compared theological and modern forms of sovereignty, where the locus of power appears transcendental in the former, and immanent for the latter (Lefort 1988, chap. 11). In both cases obviously, there is no positive source of power, but this is only visible in a democracy. I would argue that in Latvia, the sovereignty of ‘the people’ is framed in an almost theological way, since it remains outside the ‘everyday’ social-political world, while embodying its legitimacy. The ‘incarnation’ of this power is not delegated to the representative mechanism, since that would reveal the gap in the self-image, but is instead imagined through the direct actions of ‘the people’ such as referendums, signature

collections, and other actions that seemingly affirm the direct ‘presence’ of ‘the people’.

From Laclau’s point of view, the solution for the situation in Latvia would be untying the signifiers of national identity from their ethnocultural meaning and establishing new antagonistic frontiers for constructing the popular identity within the state. However, if we follow Lefort’s perspective, the inclusion of the representative mechanism in the self-identification becomes a much more crucial issue than merely a function of discursive articulation as premised by Laclau. For Lefort, democracy means a complete symbolic mutation of the mode of power, while for Laclau, it means a quest for the expansion of equality as identified with the logic of populism. While these two perspectives are not incompatible, Laclau’s framework underestimates the ontologically determining role of representative institutions in democracy.

Before moving forward to the empirical analysis, one last conceptual aspect must be addressed, namely, whether Latvia can indeed be considered a case of democratic identity construction. The full implication of applying Lefort’s argument would be as follows: since the locus of power in Latvia is seen as being situated outside the political sphere, the mutation of pre-democratic to democratic power has not yet taken place. The crucial difference, however, is that when Lefort discusses the pre-democratic regime, power, relegated to the transcendental subject, keeps the whole social realm united and whole, thereby concealing the split of its constitution. In Latvia, the split is institutionalized through the existence of representative government and competitive party politics. Lefort’s overall argument about democracy concerns the general condition of modernity and its consequences as well as the rejection of those consequences. Latvia’s democratic identity construction, which the next two chapters will discuss in more detail, is one of a reaction to the condition that Lefort describes. The following empirical analysis demonstrates how ‘unity’ has been established as the key signifier of Latvian national identity, and how this has been articulated within the self-representation of its democratic identity. Before that, the next section explains the methodology of the primary source analysis in the dissertation.

4.4. Method

The primary empirical method of the dissertation is poststructuralist discourse analysis. Discourse should be understood here to mean a form of meaning construction that regulates social and political life. With its anti-essentialist ontology, the method of poststructuralist discourse analysis posits ‘that there is no pre-given, self-determining essence that is capable of determining and ultimately fixing all other identities within a stable and totalizing structure’ (Torfing 2005, 13). From the poststructuralist perspective, there is no meaning available to us outside the representation of that meaning in discourse; it is only understandable to us when articulated as text, and this articulation is always partial, contingent and malleable

(Dunn and Neumann 2016, 39–40). Through discourse, the meanings that constitute representations of social reality are articulated, in an attempt to achieve a temporary grounding of social identities and subjectivities (Marttila 2019, 19–20). In its philosophical assumptions, discourse analysis connects with post-foundationalist perspectives on democracy, as represented by Laclau and Lefort, among others. In fact, Tomas Marttila uses ‘post-foundational discourse analysis’ instead of poststructuralist discourse analysis, thereby stressing the connection with the philosophy of treating the social as groundless (19).

The ontology and epistemology of discourse analysis does not presuppose relativism in the social process of discursive construction. The key point of a discursive approach is that by identifying the discursive themes, categories and structures that organize a particular semantic field, one can establish what types of statements and actions are possible in this context. Without referencing the existing discursive structures, any political statement risks being unintelligible to its audience (Hopf 2016, 23). The difference with the more mainstream frameworks of qualitative methodology, is that post-structuralists do not posit extra-discursive factors of their analysis, because it adopts the premise that any notion of ‘Truth’ is already conditioned by its context (Torfing 2005, 13–14).

The main empirical task of the thesis is to map dominant discourses that constitute notions such as the ‘people’, ‘democracy’, ‘state’ and ‘politics’, and other concepts associated with representative institutions. In this way, my goal is to establish a set of identity categories or ‘dispositions’ (Guzzini 2017, 747) that regulate understandings about politics, state – society relationship and democratic representation. In this case, the analysis of language means approaching words and relations between words as “‘signifiers’ whose meanings and identities depend on discourses or systems of significant differences’ (Howarth 2013, 241). David Howarth gives an example, where “New Labour” in British politics is only meaningful when contrasted with signifiers such as “Old Labour”, “the New Right”, or the “traditional Left” (241).

Establishing a hegemonic position implies stabilizing the relations between signifiers and the creation of dominant discourses on the basis of them. The dissertation focuses on hegemonic discourses, as well as discourses that struggle for the hegemonic position, in order to uncover the key elements in defining and understanding politics within that particular space. In this regard, the analysis focuses on the most-read newspapers and most-visited online portals, which will be discussed more below. This means that with my analysis, I do not aim to identify some privileged speakers, who can represent the hegemonic discourse. Rather, I intend to uncover a broader set of meanings and relations that are widely accepted in the public space. Post-foundational analysis is premised on a ‘decentered notion of subjectivity’ that ‘implicates that all social practices are conducted in accordance with the logic of ‘co-authorship’ because one’s action is rarely one’s own and rarely for one’s own sake only, for it is pulled, pushed, harmonized, agitated, coaxed, pleaded by multiple bonds’ (Marttila 2019, 25). In this case, ‘co-authorship’ refers to the continuous process of discourse articulation and re-articulation.

Discourse theory or the ‘Essex school’ as developed by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is probably the most influential framework for poststructuralist discourse analysis (Torfing 2005; Marttila 2019; Howarth 2013). The key analytical categories from their framework are ‘floating signifiers’ that are the centre of political struggle of ascribing hegemonic meanings, and ‘empty signifiers’ or ‘nodal points’ – the key notions that structure and provide a temporary grounding for a discursive field (Howarth 2013, 243). In Latvia, this proves to be the case with the notion of ‘unity’. Though it is important to identify the pertinent signifiers for discourse analysis, it is also important to highlight sections 3.6. and 4.3. of the dissertation, which discuss the limitations of Laclau’s approach to hegemony. Thus, while I draw on Laclau and Mouffe’s framework in my empirical analysis, I do not fully accept the full implications of their approach to the construction of democratic identity. The differences between Laclau and Lefort in the context of discourse analysis which I presented here will be more fully presented in the final chapter.

My guiding empirical research questions are thus: 1) what are the dominant signifiers of democratic identity and relations between them that appear in the relevant discourses? and 2) how do these signifiers represent conceptions of democracy in Latvia in the context of the normative role of representative institutions? Chronologically, my analysis covers the whole post-independence era from the late 1980s up until contemporary times. As Oliver Marchart argued, the post-foundationalist perspective does not place politics in a vacuum, instead any political activity is ‘always enfolded in sedimented layers of traditions which, conversely, are ungrounded, flexible and changeable for their part’ (Marchart 2007, 3–4). The 5th and 6th chapters that present the results of the discourse analysis draw on a layered approach of identity construction, of which the 5th chapter concerns the deepest layer of a particular discursive space that is the slowest to undergo a fundamental change (Hansen and Waever 2000, 29–30) (Table 3).

Ole Wæver has devised a multi-layered model of national identity construction that captures the dynamics between the different levels and their propensity for change (Waever 2005, 36–38). For the purpose of this study, I continue to refer to ‘national identity’ as a concept from Wæver’s framework, but I use it as a purely analytical category that treats reference to the ‘nation-state’ as the focal point of discursive self-representation. This means that the empirical analysis presented in the dissertation is not focused on the study of national identity per se, but views it as framework for practices of identification (see also Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Studying such practices follows the relational links that are constructed between ‘the people’ and other key notions such as ‘state’ and ‘politics’. The first and deepest layer in his framework refers to those basic categories of collectivity such as ‘the nation’, ‘the people’ and ‘the state’, without which it is difficult to imagine any political community (37). This level, which will be explored in the 5th chapter, comprises those periods when notions like the ‘Latvian nation’ and ‘Latvian state’ were at their most crucial moment of mobilization (Table 3).

Table 3. Sources and periods of analysis for the national identity construction in Latvia

Period	First layer	Second and third layer
Mid 19th century to 1939	Secondary literature	
1989–1991	Discourse analysis of primary sources	
2000–2011 (national referendums and signature collections)		Discourse analysis of primary sources
2016–2020 (online initiatives)		Discourse analysis of primary sources

Source: Hansen, L., Wæver, O. (2002) (eds) *European integration and national identity: the challenge of the Nordic states*, p. 29–30

The next two layers refer to a space of struggle between different interpretations of these basic categories and to the articulation of these interpretations into specific policies (39). These last two levels most closely correspond to ordinary party competition and politics, and are thus the most prone to periodic change. In this dissertation, the two layers refer to particular moments, when the deepest layer has potentially become politicized through mass mobilizations such as referendums and signature collections, and the public discussions surrounding them (Table 3).

In contrast to Wæver’s framework, which focuses on the relationship between national identity discourses and foreign policy, my study merges the second and third layers together, since I do not focus on particular policy decisions. However, they still constitute part of the debate about the self-representation of democratic identity in Latvia, therefore I still conceptually include the last layer.

To a degree, Wæver’s model corresponds to Claude Lefort’s terms of different layers of symbolic self-representation (Lefort 1988, 11, 217). One can imagine the first level as a *mise-en-forme* insofar as it sets the form of society, and ‘lies, so to speak, behind the theoretical constructs and advances in philosophical thought’ (Lefort 1988, 217). The more visible levels are the staging of the form of the society (*mise-en-scène*) and the execution of its meaning (*mis-en-sens*) through different agents. These two levels constitute the social space

As a space of intelligibility articulated in accordance with a specific mode of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary, the true and the false, the just and the unjust, the permissible and the forbidden, the normal and the pathological. They are staged in that this space contains within it a quasi-representation of itself as being aristocratic, monarchic, despotic, democratic or totalitarian (Lefort 1988, 11–12).

The empirical analysis focuses on the two latter levels – with staging and ascribing referring to the social space through self-representations of Latvian identity

(Table 3). While the place of power allows for the imagination of a united political space, the content of the regime itself, the concrete discursive meanings of ‘the people’, ‘nation’, ‘democracy’ and ‘representative institutions’, are constructed by staging and meaning-ascription processes. The goal of discourse analysis is to uncover this process.

4.4.1. Source Selection

The dissertation covers a long period of time in Latvia’s history up to the contemporary period. In order to limit the material to a manageable scale, I focused on certain events of discursive mobilization in recent Latvian history for the primary source analysis and relied on the secondary literature about national identity construction in the pre-World War II period. In this way, I was able to trace the evolution of discursive layers over an extended period of time. This first historical period addressed the time of nation-building from the mid-19th century until the establishment of the republic in 1918 and the authoritarian coup of the mid-1930s. In order to analyze the thought of the first Latvian nationalists and their intellectual influence on the notion of the ‘Latvian nation’, I mostly drew upon an unpublished dissertation on this topic by renowned historian Andrejs Plakans (Plakans 1969). To my knowledge, his work, alongside that of Ieva Zaķe (Zaķe 2007; 2008), remains among the few who have applied a constructivist outlook (broadly defined) to analyzing the construction of national identity in Latvia. The period of the interwar republic is even less researched in this regard, except on the construction of the authoritarian regime of 1930s. Due to time constraints, I was not able to work with primary sources from the period of the first parliamentary period of 1920–1934, but for the future researchers of the national identity construction in Latvia this period should continue to be an important focus of analysis.

The second historical focus that refers to the first layer of identity construction (Table 3) concerns the nation-and-state-building stage during Latvia’s independence movement from the Soviet Union and the immediate aftermath of the independence proclamation. The concrete time period of analysis covers the period of the re-independence struggle, and the re-establishment of the main independent political institutions (1988–1991). Specifically, I focused on the discourses of the Popular Front of Latvia (PFL), which was the largest organization in the pro-independence movement. Again, little primary research has been done on the discourses of national identity construction in the re-independence movement period. Instead, scholars have focused on establishing the historical narrative and the socio-cultural context of the period (for instance, (Bleiere 2006), and less on taking a critical distance from the identity construction processes at that time. In this case, I carried out an analysis of the primary sources from the period.

The sources for the discourse analysis were selected to represent the dominant political discourse, using texts from newspaper articles such as leadership speeches by the key political figures, manifestos, parliamentary debates, and interviews as

they were reported as well as statements and speeches from civil society representatives, newspaper editorials, interviews, opinion articles, and letters to editor (see Hansen 2006, 66; Dunn and Neumann 2016, 91–94; Hopf 2016, 33–34). The important aspect is not the status of a single text, but the relations and identifications that re-appear across a variety of texts that reveal certain stable discursive formations (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 91). Initially, I focused on the usage of certain key signifiers such as ‘democracy’ and ‘nation’, yet, the task of the analyst is to uncover and follow-up on other signifiers and discursive elements that are often used together with the particular notion in question. Relations between certain identity elements are not given but are discovered and identified through the process of discourse analysis (92). The goal of the source analysis was to establish the set of dominant identity categories and set out the contextual knowledge they were embedded within.

The data collection comprised political and public statements in daily newspapers with the highest circulation being from the period of 1988–1991: *Atmoda* (*The Awakening*), the official publication of the PFL (active from 1988 to 1993, highest circulation 30 000 – 165 000 copies in a period from 1988 to 1991), *Lauku Avīze* (*The Countryside Newspaper*), an example of a transformed version of an old, Soviet era newspaper (active from 1988 with the highest circulation 110 800 – 240 000 copies from 1991 to 1993) as well as *Diena* (*The Day*), founded in 1990 as the official newspaper by the new Supreme Council of Latvia (highest circulation 69 300 – 104 100 copies from 1992 to 1993) (National Library of Latvia 2019). As the newspapers were published either daily or weekly, they covered a great deal of material, and thus selections were drawn randomly by taking copies from the 1st, 5th and 15th days of each month (or the closest published issue date) for each newspaper to cover a respective month. This approach of randomized selection was chosen since the focus was on the construction of primary level of self-representation. In this case, my focus was not on specific events of the period, but on more general ‘common sense’ perceptions that appeared in public discourses (see Hopf 2016). However, if a larger debate surrounded a concrete event, additional issues of the respective newspaper were surveyed. In the process of reading the selected material, the main discursive categories of defining ‘the people’, ‘the state’ and ‘the nation’ and ‘democracy’ were established as well as discourses in which relations between these notions were articulated.

Next, I focused on selecting sources concerning the politicization or conflicts in conceptions of the democratic self-representation of power. Conflict and struggle is an important source of the potential material for a discourse analyst since it brings forward the tension between different identity articulations (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 92). In this case, I focused on the self-representations of power that appeared during the frequent use of constitutional provisions for direct democracy in Latvia. As the focus of the study, I identified the potential conflict of the tension between power symbolized by representative institutions and the notion of an unmediated expression of citizens’ power. Most significantly, a successful national signature collection was hosted in 2008 that allowed citizens

to recall the parliament, and which resulted in a referendum after the parliament rejected it; furthermore, this provision was later included in the constitution in 2010, and the referendum on the dissolution of parliament finally took place in 2011 – it is still one of the few instances of this happening in Europe. All of these developments suggest that the use of referendums and signature collections bear a greater role for the construction of democratic identity in Latvia than merely being procedural tools of representative democracy.

Within the poststructuralist perspective described above, the point of the discourse analysis was to understand the meaning ascribed to referendums and other such initiatives in the Latvian context.

Table 4. Selected events for the discourse analysis of the period from 2000 to 2021

Event	Year/period	Provision of direct democracy
Draft law against the privatization of the national electric company	2000	Constitutional right for citizens to collect signatures for submitting a draft law
Referendum on the president's vetoed law on state security institutions	2007	President's initiative to veto a draft law and call a referendum on the decision
Draft law for the citizens' right to recall the parliament	2008	Constitutional right for citizens to collect signatures for submitting a draft law
Referendum on the citizens' right to recall the referendum	2008	Referendum after the parliament rejected the draft law on the same initiative
Referendum on the recalling of the parliament	2011	President's initiative to initiate referendum, after collecting the threshold of citizens' signatures
Online signature collection for abolishing property tax	2016 – 2017	Right for citizens to submit a legislative initiative to a parliament's commission
Online signature collections against various pandemic restrictions of COVID-19	2020 – 2021	Right for citizens to submit a legislative initiative to a parliament's commission

Through studying discourses surrounding the selected events of direct democracy initiatives in Latvia, my goal was to uncover the dominant conceptions of democratic power, and their contextualization of representative institutions specifically. Thus, I focused on the several instances of organizing national referendums and signature collections that were either a result or a requirement of these referendums. The period of 2007 to 2011 was especially rich with referendums. However, I did select particular instances in order to maintain a necessary focus and

to consider the interest of time (all of the selected referendums are listed in the Table 4). Those instances were chosen for the underlying reason of uncovering discourses concerning the nation and the state and the relationship constructed between them, specifically concerning the role of political institutions.

The first of these events is the submission of a legislative bill by a citizens' initiative against the privatization of the national electric utility in 2000. Since the early 1990s, citizens had used the right to submit a legislation draft eight times, and the act of 2000 still remains the only legislation that has been adopted by the parliament as a result of such an initiative. Alongside this citizens' initiative, I also cover the 2008 legislative act concerning the right to dissolve parliament, which parliament ultimately rejected. Six such legislative acts have been submitted since 1991. Four reached the final signature threshold by one-tenth of the electorate and were submitted to the parliament. Besides the act on the dissolution of parliament, the remaining two initiatives resulted in a referendum on the pension law and on the second state language.

The next events which will be covered occurred in a volatile period from 2007 to 2011, which saw the 'Umbrella Revolution' in 2007, which was one of the largest post-independence civil society mobilizations ever; the citizens' initiative to simplify the process of recalling the parliament in 2008; a violent protest in front of parliament in 2009; and, finally, the dissolution of the parliament of 2011 through a referendum. Out of the nine referendums that have taken place in Latvia since 1991, four were conducted from 2007 to 2011. Of those four, I analysed the discourses of three: the referendum in 2007 on the state security law, in 2008 on citizens' rights to dissolve parliament, and in 2011 on the dissolution of parliament. I am not covering all nine referendums that occurred since 1991 as four of them concern principal constitutional matters and the establishment of the external border of the nation, as discussed in the section 4.3.: the independence referendum in 1991, the referendum of joining the EU in 2003, the referendum on the citizenship law in 1998, and the referendum for Russian being the second state language in 2012. Two other referendums in 1999 and 2008 concern the law on pensions, which is a more sector-based issue than the other referendums and are also closer in the timeline to the two referendums analysed here.

My sources of analysis were the most read newspapers in the Latvian language during the period when the analysed events took place, namely, *Diena*, *Latvijas Avīze* (a successor of *Lauku Avīze*) and now also *Neatkarīga Rīta Avīze* (Kantar Latvia 2019). By using the online archive of periodicals www.news.lv, I searched for relevant keywords such as 'referendum' and 'signature collection' and terms related to particular issues such as Latvenergo (the national electric utility), 'parliament dissolution,' and 'security law'. I limited myself to three-month window surrounding the event, which was extended if necessary for the available material. The empirical material consisted of official statements, commentaries, and opinion pieces, and voices from the 'general public' which were published in separate 'letters to the editor' and as part of the journal articles dedicated to the issue (see Hansen 2006, 66; Dunn and Neumann 2016, 91–94; Hopf 2016, 33–34).

The period between 1988 and 2011 composed the most substantial part of the empirical research by virtue of both the time frame and the availability of data. Fewer referendums and successful signature collections have been conducted after 2012, when the question of the threshold for realizing citizens' initiatives was raised. Since then, a great deal of political activism and public debate has moved online. In a direct response to increasingly stringent constitutional requirements for citizens' direct participation, activists created an online platform My Voice, which takes advantage of a provision of parliamentary rules that allows at least 10 000 citizens to submit a legislative proposal to the respective parliament's commission. Since the platform started in 2011, 84 of its proposals have been submitted to the parliament and other relevant institutions, and 50 of them have been adopted (Mana Balss 2021). The scale of the online platform My Voice is much smaller than constitutionally established signature collections have been – the highest number of signatures for an initiative currently in the platform reaches 58 571, which is roughly a third of the 10% of the electorate that is required by constitutional initiatives. Still, during 2021 altogether, 359 citizens initiatives were submitted, and 124 were published for the signature collection, of which 12 were legally adopted, including initiatives for the liquidation of the Vaccination bureau and against closing regional universities, alongside state-financed epidural anaesthesia and against using salt for winter road upkeep (Mana Balss 2021). By contrast, there are now only two registered constitutional signature collections. Overall, successful platform initiatives have continually attracted attention in political discourse, requiring politicians to state their views on the issue and to include them in their parliamentary or municipal policy agenda. However, in contrast to the period of the active use of constitutional initiatives for direct democracy, the data concerning the most popular initiatives of the portal is more sporadic and significantly less present in the traditional media.

Nevertheless, online legislative initiatives and the active presence of My Voice over the last ten years in the Latvian public space potentially signifies a continuity of the certain conception of power that appeared in earlier discourses. To see how these discursive formations hold up in the contemporary context, I selected successful online legislative initiatives which were submitted as well as signature collections by citizens. As mentioned above, in contrast to the data collection from 2000 to 2011, substantial changes have taken place in the media landscape due to the increasing importance of social media and online news platforms. Compared to the keyword search results from the earlier period and the more contemporary sources, the number of commentaries in newspapers has decreased. This can be related to the narrower scope of online initiatives, the decrease in the popularity of traditional newspapers, and the transfer of a great deal of the public debate to the online space, including social media. For data collection from the more recent period, I looked up the available statistics from the most read daily newspapers and weeklies from 2016 to 2020 (Kantar Latvia 2019), some of which had not changed since 2011, save for the appearance of a new weekly newspaper *IR*, founded by part of the former *Diena* editorial team. The empirical material also included the most visited internet sites in the same period (Gemius Latvia

2021). I selected the internet sites that were focused on news and reporting, as well as published opinion pieces.

The key goal of this analysis was to determine whether the discursive formations of the first layer (Table 3) were continuous with the most recent period. The discursive layer of foundational notions such as ‘nation’ and ‘people’ was the slowest to change, and, by accounting for the contextualization established from researching earlier periods, I was able to assess whether there are indications of potential shifts in the discourse. Further social media analysis is a valuable source for future research since the public debate has moved to an online environment, and the role of traditional media such as newspapers has decreased. An important part of the public debate was conducted on social media, e.g., on Twitter. As social media analysis requires a comprehensive and special research design, this task would require a much longer period of time to produce results comparable to the newspaper analysis. Thus, the material that was acquired for analysis of the most contemporary period was more limited than for earlier contexts. However, it still constitutes a very important part of the overall analysis by outlining a link between the first decade of the 2000s and more current political and social developments.

I would not generalize the research method from Latvia to other countries, considering that the construction of symbolic self-representation is unique to each state and requires in-depth knowledge to identify informative sources and moments in time. The more general dimension in this case is the re-evaluation of the existing conceptual framework and pushing forward new theoretical concepts and approaches with which we can analyse democracy in Eastern Europe. Considering that the experience of becoming a democracy has been different in different places, I suggest that research in this direction should not try to develop overarching models and criteria for democratic quality but develop context-sensitive analyses and engage with theoretical perspectives that best help to interpret empirical insights.

The next two chapters will examine the results from analyzing the various data described above. The fifth chapter will be dedicated to the formation of the foundational layer of national self-representation in Latvia – starting with its formation, historical context and the key conceptions that were established in the period before World War II. It will then continue with establishing how the tension between the ideas of ‘nation’, ‘state’, ‘democracy’ and ‘unity’ was articulated in the watershed moment of Latvia being re-established as a nation-state. The sixth chapter will examine the moments of citizens directly making decisions and the idea of power that appeared during the events that unfolded over the last twenty years. The following analysis will then serve as a case for examining the role of political institutions in one particular context for the wider debate on the normative dimension in post-foundationalist democratic politics.

5. National Identity Construction in Latvia: Historical Background

5.1. Introduction

This chapter establishes the historical background for the construction of national identity in Latvia. The first historical period in question addresses the time of nation-building from the mid-19th century until the establishment of the republic in 1918 and the authoritarian coup in the mid-1930s. The second historical period in question addresses the nation-and-state-building stage during Latvia's independence movement from the Soviet Union and the immediate aftermath of the re-independence proclamation. Both of these periods constitute crucial points of reference for uncovering primary discursive categories in the self-representation of power. They are central in establishing how different signifiers such as 'democracy' and the 'state' negotiate the relationship between 'the people' and its institutional representation. As the chapter will argue, 'unity' has become one of the most important signifiers of Latvian national identity. Meanwhile, 'the state' can be excluded from that identity conception and remain radically beyond 'the people'. The chapter will then proceed to lay out the discursive formations which are key to tracing the history of how these constellations play out in the national discourses concerning direct action by citizens.

5.2. The Historical Context of the Construction of Latvian National Identity

Before the 1850s, literary culture in the Latvian language was produced by Baltic Germans for Latvians, who in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire mainly constituted the peasant strata. Such literature was meant for either religious instruction or entertainment. Those of Latvian descent who wanted to pursue further education and professional mobility had to undergo 'denationalization', i.e., had to assimilate into Baltic German circles (Plakans 1969, 7). As one of the first-generation Latvian writers, Matīss Kaudzīte wrote, even by the late 1870s, 'no house or family of educated Latvians existed, which, being German-educated and knowing the German language, at the same time would speak Latvian at home' (Kaudzite, 1994, as cited in Ijabs 2014b, 93). When Latvians first started to produce their own works in the Latvian language, they felt an urgent need to prove the equality of the Latvian language and culture to the dominant Baltic German one. At the same time, the German cultural space remained an object for emulation, not the least because the dominant educational tradition among Baltic Germans had treated Latvians as immature, inferior, and in need of guidance to achieve their 'full humanity' (Ijabs 2014b, 92). Thus, Latvian intellectual traditions developed in a space where, despite the internalized sense that the 'upper

class of persons signified [the] upper class of ideas' (Plakans 1969, 106), the perceived task was for the emerging Latvian culture to acquire equal recognition in established intellectual circles (Zake 2007, 308; Ijabs 2014b, 102). This sense of inferiority and lagging behind the 'great culture-nations' alongside the increasing assimilation among Latvians created an immediate existential demand to establish a successful national identity in the eyes of first generation Latvian nationalist intellectuals (Plakans 1969, 99,106).

To these developments, Latvian nationalist intellectuals mainly had a twofold response, which historian Andrejs Plakans has defined as the critical and reverential styles of thought. The first one focused on the long period of serfdom that had kept Latvians in the dark about progressive developments in 'cultured nations' and lamented the long road ahead in trying to catch up with others. The second perspective focused on the time before the Teutonic Order when Latvian tribes had their own flourishing culture, deities, norms, etc., the development of which was violently interrupted by the onslaught of German knights (Plakans 1969, 22). Both perspectives took points of reference from Baltic Germans' earlier writings about Latvians, with an especially notable role attributable to writer, Garlieb Merkel. As Plakans pointed out, Merkel's writings about Latvians gave young Latvian intellectuals a philosophy of history: the main points of which were the nobleness of their pagan past, the degradation of the people brought by serfdom, and the need for correct education to bring about the enlightened building of culture (100–106). As noted by Plakans (157–160), Merkel himself wrote in the context of Enlightenment philosophy, and focused on the injustice of serfdom in the context of social contract theory as well as mystical elements of the peasant past, which referenced the figure of the 'noble savage'. However, Latvian intellectuals were not aware of this context and approached Merkel's text as a 'programmatic guide' (157) for building their nationalist ideology.

Merkel's work highlighted two streaks in early Latvian national thought – one focused on gaining validation as a cultured nation by the standards of 'great culture-nations' and one focused on recapturing the past by cultivating an authentic culture of their own. The reverential tradition grew to become the most influential among Latvian intellectuals. By the late 1890s, it had grown to embrace not only the pagan past but also the lifestyle of the peasantry, which was opposed to 'products of foreign spirit' – urbanization and industrialization (Plakans 1969, 196, 214). The changes brought by modernization were seen as detrimental to the traditions of the past, which embedded the pure spirit of the people (226). In different degrees, the perceived superiority of modernity was solved by positioning Latvian tradition as a civilizational equal to the West. One example suggests that 'if only the Germans had not enslaved Latvians for centuries, Latvian civilization would have been equivalent to that of Ancient Greece' (Zake 2008, 318).

On the opposite side, the critical perspective focused not on the tribal past and agricultural lifestyle but on modernity and its perceived civilizational achievements. From this perspective, Latvian identity was linked to modernity in a negative way, i.e., by its perceived lack of progress and civilization. Unlike the

reverential perspective with its positive image of peasant traditions and lifestyle as a naïve idealism, conformism, and provincialism (Plakans 1969, 245), critically-minded intellectuals emphasized the inadequacies and limitations of the national culture and thought. However, besides rejecting the reverential perspective, critical intellectuals did not offer alternative signifiers to peasantry, ethnic culture and language that were the reverential symbols of the collective identity, at least not until many of them turned to Marxism and socialism.

Similarly, as Hermet noted in his discussion of Laclau described in section 4.3., the first articulations of national culture in Latvia did not focus on its political dimension but made their way through bourgeois circles to the masses (Zake 2008). Yet, the process was not entirely straight-forward, since from the start of the 20th century, the nationalist ideology, which was heavily influenced by the reverential tradition, was challenged by home-grown Marxism as well as by those Latvians who were generally sceptical of the idea of a national state and were looking to create a political unit shared with Baltic Germans. In the reverential conception, members of the nation were tied not only by blood and language but also by spiritual ties, which sustained the nation's existence during the period when it did not have a material form, such as before the mid-19th century (Plakans 2011, 225). In this view, the nation had an 'essential spirit that animated the old and the new communities' of the nation over time, thus connecting them. This self-articulation of the national identity 'did not acquire creating something new, but that culture already existed in the 'national spirit' and needed only evocation' (Plakans 1969, 202–5). Thus, since the past so understood guaranteed the existence of the present identity, and made it in principle ahistorical, it was difficult to modify the national identity since this would mean 'invoking' or 'discovering' parts of an identity that already existed as a fully formed unit.

Marxism offered the second substantial alternative to the nationalist conception of collective identity during the time of early Latvian nationalism, as it was formulated by Latvian Marxist intellectuals and their followers. Importantly, it did not foreground the notion of the 'nation' as essential for its ideology. Many intellectuals who did not find the reverential nationalist perspective appealing at the turn of the 20th century, took up the Marxist philosophy of class struggle as their main framework. Significantly, their writings did not focus on applying Marxist philosophy to the analysis of local conditions, except to the degree to which all Latvians represented a subjected class fighting against their oppressors (Plakans 1969, 277). For Latvian Marxist thinkers, the fact that Latvians had been historically underprivileged implied their automatic inclusion in the universal class of the underprivileged. Their primary struggle was for the universal class of workers, and they regarded the idea of the nation as a 'mist' in workers' eyes, which obscured their ability to see their strictly defined class interests (Dribins 1997, 46). Though some thinkers attempted to combine both the Marxist framework and nationally oriented thought, most notably Miķelis Valters (Ijabs 2012), they were in the minority. An even bigger minority were those Latvian intellectuals who argued for cooperation with the Baltic Germans. Consequently, reverential nationalists did not encounter any serious competitors in developing

a hegemonic conception of the nation. However, Marxist thought was the first to position 'modernity' as an important signifier for Latvian national identity. It was connected with the notions of being 'civilized' and 'cultured', which, in turn, invoked opposition within the reverential perspective, where modernity was seen as having little to do with authentic Latvian culture and even threatened it.

Nevertheless, the foundation of the state in 1918 did not follow the model of the dominant reverential interpretation of the nation. In the debates preceding and during the establishment of the new republic, less direct attention was afforded to the idea of the nation. Instead, the debate mainly focused on the conception of the state (Bleiere 2006). For example, the section of the Constitution that would have been dedicated to the rights of different ethnic groups living in Latvia was discussed but never adopted (Bleiere 2006). The national bourgeoisie, comprised of the professional urban and the wealthy agricultural classes, formed one of the biggest new Latvian political parties – the Farmers' Union. Thus, while farmers would be associated with the opposition to the urban class in many other contexts, in the Latvian context, they in many ways formed the urban elite. Thus, the key divide was between the reverential symbolism of the farmers' lifestyle and that of the critical socialists striving towards becoming a 'modern' state. In a split from the general Latvian Marxist movement, the Social Democratic Workers' Party was formed, which agreed to the need to form a national state. These parties were the two main actors in the constitutional process of 1918–1920 and remained the key political parties in the interwar parliamentary period of the republic.

Little primary research has been done on political discourses from the period between 1918 – 1934, making it difficult to outline the main elements of how national identity was constructed at the time. However, one can conclude from the existing literature that at the political level, neither the reverential nor the critical version of the nation were hegemonic – nor did the farmers or the socialists have any apparent political hegemony. Nationalist intellectuals expressed their disappointment at the perceived absence of the reverential tradition in the political discourse. They criticized democracy because it did not allow for the expression of the people's unity and their unique spirit; instead, it promoted individualism and particularism (Zake 2007, 299; Lipsa 2013, 332). Political life was seen as failing to provide a sense of shared goals; it did not feature any of the reverential symbolism that had been associated with 'the people' – instead, it was characterized by 'the shallowness and selfishness [...] the complete lack of at least some noble acts, the absolute absence of heroism' (Zake 2007, 298). The narrative of the heroic Latvian people surviving the long hardship of foreign occupation did not constitute a crucial part of democratic identity in the interwar republic, much to the disappointment of a significant part of the intellectual elite.

For the Latvian Social Democrats, 'democracy' was the central signifier of national identity, though it seemed to be defined by critique of their political opponents and the political inflexibility towards the goals of 'modernization' (Bleiere 2006). This negative discourse was marked by the rejection of the reverential conception of the nation, but Social Democrats' anchoring of 'democracy' was too universal for a specifically national conception of 'the people'. No

sources indicate that Latvian Social Democrats provided a conception of national identity that would be comparable to the narrative of peoplehood as envisioned by the nationalists. Thus, even as the critical tradition, which had evolved through Marxist thought, had finally included the nation, it retained the negative perspective, which sought to criticize the inadequate modernization of the society instead of articulating a positive conception of national identity.

The parliamentary period of the interwar republic was interrupted after the authoritarian *coup d'état* by Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis, the figurehead of the Farmers' Union, in 1934. Finally, a clearer political hegemony of Latvian national identity was established, and it stood firmly until Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939. The authoritarian regime fully instituted the reverential conception of the nation at the political level. The main symbols of the state became the farmer and agriculture; 'the basis of our nation' in Ulmanis's words (Hanovs and Tēraudkalns 2014, 70). Much attention was dedicated to representing Latvians' heroic and mythical past at this time. One such expression would have been large public performances such as the "Renewal of Zemgale", which was about the tribal contests of the 13th century and included a symbolic blessing from the ancient pagan leader Namejs to Ulmanis (Hanovs and Tēraudkalns 2014, 74). Such events were designed to depict the lost Latvian Golden Age (Zake 2007, 295). The invasion by the German knights in the 13th century was 'repeatedly interpreted as a dramatic point in Latvian history, a fatal moment that stopped the prosperity and cultural development of the nation' (Hanovs and Tēraudkalns 2014, 77). Ulmanis' regime mobilized and developed the reverential narrative of the nation, and nationalist intellectuals lauded its political success as carrying the 'ultimate clarity and harmony', 'spirituality' and 'authenticity' (Zake 2007, 297). From this perspective, democracy as well as party politics – which symbolized individualistic and self-serving interests, as opposed to unity and heroism – stood in direct contrast to defining the nation. The authoritarian regime articulated a version of statehood which was compatible with the ethnonational conception of the nation, which had failed in the parliamentary period of 1920 to 1934 that failed to provide a successful alternative hegemonic conception of the nation.

The period from the first nationalist movement in the mid-19th century until the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union in 1939 demonstrates a clear continuity of what Plakans described as the reverential tradition in national thought. This tradition evolved over time, yet certain key elements remained the same – the heroic tribal past, ethnic culture and language, peasant lifestyle, and, most significantly, the ahistorical 'spirit' that formed the unity of the people across hundreds of years, even during periods when Latvians were not yet 'awakened' to the sense of their national belonging. This discourse, however, was never strongly connected with the discourse on the 'state' until the authoritarian regime of 1934 – 1939. It appears that Latvian nationalist intellectuals' more acute need was the success of a culturally 'Latvian' identity – which was understandable in the conditions where belonging to, for instance, Baltic Germans provided a much surer means of social mobility. The basic insecurity of 'Latvian' as a cultural and

political identity can thus help to explain the focus on ‘unity’ and the common ‘spirit’ in identity discourses.

The ‘state’ was mainly associated with ‘modernity’ and ‘democracy’, which was an identity most prominently articulated by Marxist and social-democratic traditions in Latvia. Though additional research is clearly needed regarding the leftist responses to national identity in the interwar period, in statements from nationalist intellectuals of the 1930s, one clearly sees that democracy was associated with something foreign to Latvian national identity, which expressed their implicit and explicit conflict with the left-wing counterparts. Evidently, ‘democracy’ was an identity category that was excluded from the nationalist conception of the nation, especially during the authoritarian period. Such conflicts between ‘unity’ and ‘modernity’ and ‘nation’ and ‘democracy’ characterized the interwar period. The next section explores how this relationship evolved after the independence movement from the Soviet Union began and the republic was re-established.

5.3. The Popular Front and the Construction of ‘The People’

The second crucial period of national identity construction came in the national independence struggle and its aftermath between 1988 and 1993. The relation between the nation and the state was not articulated successfully in this period either – neither for the ethnonationalists nor the potentially democratic alternative. The period from 1988 to 1993 was marked by crucial developments in the process of regaining national independence and re-establishing the Republic of Latvia: the foundation of the Popular Front of Latvia (PFL), the mass protests against the national Communist government, the election of Popular Front members to the Supreme Soviet, its transformation to the Supreme Council of Latvia, the restoration of independence, the Soviet coup attempt and the declaration of *de facto* independence. The period can be divided into two parts that are also reflected in the discourse: the struggle for national sovereignty (1988–1990) and the establishment (first *de jure*, then *de facto*) of national sovereignty, also defined as the transitional period (1990–1993). From the first stage until 1989, the PFL was still arguing in favour of transforming the socialist regime in line with the ideals of Perestroika. From 1989 on, it gradually articulated the demand for national independence. Both stages of pre-independence discourse were marked by a clear opposition to the Communist Party government in Moscow. Still, initially, the opposition was constructed by depicting the Communist government in Russia as compromised and hypocritical about its Soviet ideals. Later, the communist regime was opposed to Latvian identity as a whole.

Little primary research has been undertaken on discourses concerning the construction of national identity from 1988 to 1993. Thus, this section will include original research of the political and public statements in the most widely distributed daily newspapers from the period. The data selection is further described in section 4.4 on method.

The PFL articulated a universalistic approach to identity – its 1989 call to its members read: ‘Latvia must become a state of humanism, where there is the rule of law, economic growth and broad opportunities for spiritual and cultural development for every ethnic group’ (*Atmoda* 1989). The key signifiers in this call were the notions of democracy, modernization, and humanism that were understood to be in opposition to the ‘old system’ of the Soviet regime. A leading PFL member argued that one of the key goals of the current political struggle was to guarantee the protection of democratic and human rights, as well as the rule of law regarding interethnic relations along with the general sphere of ‘the interest of humanity’ (Lakis 1989). At the same time, one of the main tasks of the future state was that of ‘the renewing of the national consciousness, the regaining of the ethnic self-confidence, the fight against *mankurtism*⁴’ (Lakis 1989). The idea was that the democratic state would serve as a framework for developing its different ethnic groups, with the Latvian nation taking the lead to counter any threat to its language and culture. Still, by contrast to what Laclau described as ethno-populism, the nation and the state were not identified as one. While the ethnic conception of the nation remained the dominant one, the state was instead described in far more universalistic terms. So, while the state-to-be was assigned the principles of universal and democratic rights, and as a ‘neutral’ ground for articulating collective demands, the nation itself was seen as ethnic and particular.

During this period of national identity construction, the relation between the nation and the state was insufficiently elaborated. The more particular meaning of ‘democracy’ and ‘humanism’ and their links with the Latvian nation remained vague. From the Laclauian perspective, this was where an essential contradiction in the hegemonic construction of the national identity began to appear. The universality of democratic identity, which was supposed to include the ethnic nation of Latvians and other ethnic groups in the country, could not remain devoid of any particularistic element. It could have been culture and language; however, this was not a link the PFL was ready to make – instead, modernization appeared to be the common element. Echoing the critical tradition from the interwar period, albeit now in a more amalgamated way, the Latvian nation was in a position where it needed to ‘catch up’ with the civilized world. From the perspective of the PFL, Latvians needed time and education in order to be able to have a democratic state. If earlier views attributed the damage to ‘civilizational development’ to the ages of serfdom, now, in the words of the PFL Chairman Dainis Īvāns, people had to be cured of the ills of having lived under the communist system, since ‘society was still deeply ill’ and did not understand how to act under the conditions of democracy (Balode 1989). People had to ‘learn again what it means to be human’ in order to fully enjoy the possibilities given by national independence (Streips 1990). Democracy was something that had to be learned gradually and could not be rushed into, for ‘you would give a knife to a child only

⁴ Mankurt is the name of a character in a Chinghiz Aitmatov's novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, which symbolizes an unthinking slave without any home, culture and tradition.

when you are sure that the baby will not cut himself and others. Just as in a society where some of its members might not see the whole situation' (Freimanis 1990).

One of Laclau's points regarding hegemonic processes in Eastern Europe was that the construction of community's external borders took a much more significant role than constructing internal ones. For the Latvian nation, unity based on ethnic identity was seen as an inherent premise. Yet, discursively in Latvia, 'unity' also became one of the key signifiers of the state. As with the modernization discourse, internal conflicts and divisions now resulted from the people's inability to act according to democratic and 'humanistic' norms (Balode 1989). Even if democracy was defined by pluralism and the negotiation between different group interests, for it to work in the local context, the ways of more 'mature' democracy had yet to be learned (Klavins 1991). While democracy was theoretically understood to presuppose a negotiation between both groups in society and between society and the government, social differences and conflicts were rarely articulated. Instead achieving the unity of the society for political directions was taken to be the most concrete aim. As one commentator reflected:

in the following years much will depend on how we will be able to balance the very concrete interests of a single individual and the reformation of the state according to our ideals. Which of these elements will be the most important? Evidently, there isn't a single important one – the most important is the harmony.' (Valujevs 1991)

While understood as part of the ongoing political processes, the foundation of different organizations, interest groups, and other community groups was also perceived as threatening to the overall unity of society – 'the most valuable thing' (Eņiņš 1989). How LPF leaders reminisced about their time in the independence movement is also rather revealing. Thus, one of the former PFL leaders, Sandra Kalniete, wrote in her memoir:

The Awakening [the independence movement] was a celebration for the soul. It was a time when it seemed that anything and everything was possible, achievable, and pure. The people's spiritual energy had been oppressed and tangled up in the web of Communist conjuncture for so long, but now it broke free with unusual and purifying strength. The National Awakening made us better people because it allowed us to rise above petty egotism and take a deep breath of the air of unity. [Translation by Kārlis Streips] (Kalniete, 2013, 13)

Kalniete invoked the spiritual unity that echoed the discursive motives of the reverent conception of the nation. Elements of reverential nationalism reappeared in the discourse from the period, such as peasantry and agriculture being the central markers of national identity. This theme was especially emphasized in the pages of *The Countryside Newspaper (Lauku Avīze)*, which was the periodical in highest circulation at the time. In an open letter from several members of the Latvian Farmers Union, the authors argued that agriculture symbolized everything that is 'strong, safe and responsible' and since 'no nation could live as a

disorganized crowd [...] the Latvian people will either live as a peasant nation, or it will cease to exist (*Lauku Avīze* 1990). One figure who became more prominent in the newspaper was former leader of the historical Farmers' Union party and the authoritarian leader after 1934, Kārlis Ulmanis. Ulmanis was linked with unity and political decisiveness, both of which were seen as more clearly espoused with his ethnocultural conception of the nation.

Yet, rural and nationalist circles were not the only ones who linked collective identity with elements from the reverential tradition. Alongside the agricultural lifestyle stood culture which was depicted as the reflection of the national spirit. As Juris Rubenis, a Lutheran pastor and one of the leading figures of the PFL, explained: 'every national tradition (in which are interwoven folklore, mythology, customs, etc.) is formed from a particular imaginative, aesthetic world view, which expresses the spiritual archetype of the people. Without the national tradition, we are threatened to become cosmopolites' (Rubenis 1990). Rubenis argued for a union between the particularity of the nation and the universal values of Christianity – but similarly, as in the case of democracy, the internal borders of the nation were unchallenged and any possible division within was avoided.

Overall, the discursive sphere was not divided between different projects of the Latvian nation and the Latvian state but to the validation of these identities as a whole. As long as either of them did not essentially challenge the other, these discourses regarding the nation and the state could simply exist in parallel. However, such a clash was hardly avoidable. Though they participated in the Supreme Council and in the government, which was tasked with constitutional power before the national parliament took over in 1993, the PFL rejected positioning itself as a political party. As Ivars Godmanis, who was the head of the government and the leader of the LPF fraction, said in 1990: 'PFL is not a party because it created itself not as a separate political group, but as a concentration of the peoples' forces to overcome both national and social-economic crisis on the way to the Latvian state and independence' (Godmanis 1990). The PFL did not recognize itself as *one of* the political organizations since it expressed the will of the nation as a whole. But it also didn't claim the political power of the state or a hegemonic position. Statehood was identified with democracy, which society had yet to learn and which was external to it. No major political actor challenged this modernization discourse, and thus the relation between the nation and the state remained essentially empty.

In this situation, the universalistic state which was the purported ideal was run by political actors and organizations with no solid or stable hegemonic links with the nation. The political reality of the state, with its scrabbles and fragmentation, contrasted with the idealism and unity associated with the independence movement's collective mobilizations. Once the political organization of the state divided that unity, doubts about the motivations and interests of those seeking political office began to appear. In Laclau's terms, hegemonic identity presupposes that each difference internal to the whole is addressed within this whole. In Latvia, the whole was identical with the nation – that, however, left the state

outside. In its existent form, the state could either embrace the unity of the nation or become its antagonist.

If in the interwar period, the signifiers of ‘nation’ and ‘democracy’ were in tension or even directly opposed, in the independence movement, ‘democracy’ and ‘modernization’, the latter signifier of which the conservative nationalist intellectuals of the past had criticized, signified opposition to communism and the Soviet regime. Thus, these signifiers were articulated as being central to Latvian national identity, which was drastically opposed to anything related to the Soviet Union. At this time, however, discourse around the ‘nation’ did not appear to undergo any substantial shift – its central elements remained rural life, culture and language. ‘Unity’ became a central signifier in discussing the future state of political community, and, as in the past, ‘modernization’ was ascribed to democracy. However, neither of these two signifiers provided a clear sense of how institutions could embody the self-representation of power. Instead, institutions, identified as organizations, parties, and other groups that were smaller in scale than the PFL, were depicted as being a potential threat to the successful functioning of communal life. The relation between ‘nation’, ‘state’, and ‘democracy’ was not as antagonistic as it was during the authoritarian period. The self-representation of Latvian identity was undeniably one of democracy – however, in the present articulation it sat uneasily with the focus on ‘unity’ as the defining signifier of ‘the people’.

5.4. Conclusions

I have argued that while the articulation of ‘the nation’ in the 19th century was based on the elements of culture, the pre-modern past, and agriculture (as it was quite common in the region), it also included a significant desire to be recognized as ‘modern’, ‘civilized’, and ‘equal’ to presumably mature ‘culture’-nations. This striving would also encounter opposition when the pre-modern national culture was positioned as the ‘civilizational equal’. Still, the focus on external validation was present both in ethnic nationalist discourse and the alternative Marxist and social-democrat discourses. In the interwar period, ‘modernity’ and ‘democracy’ were linked with social-democratic identity, with the antagonism between ‘democracy’ and ‘the nation’ reaching its peak during the authoritarian coup of the 1930s.

The struggle for independence from the Soviet Union presented a more challenging task for the formation of national identity since the leading discourse in Latvia at the time attempted to combine several things: the ethnic nationalist idea of the organic unity of the nation (even if the ethnic elements were often downplayed at the time) and the idea of democracy, free from its historical associations with the Left, as a symbol of belonging to the Western, developed and modern world, as opposed to the old, backward, Oriental system of the Soviet Union. Looking back at these key moments of identity construction, only the authoritarian regime was able to establish a successful hegemonic relation between the unity of ‘the people’ and the ‘oneness’ of the leader and the state.

While different discourses have emphasized ethnicity in different degrees, the principal feature of discourses on 'the people' has been the absence of any internal differentiation and potential antagonisms. This, of course, does not mean that there have not been any; in fact, one can detect a certain fundamental insecurity in how references to internal fractions have been depicted as an existential threat. However, the nation was still imagined as an essentially organic unity, while internal conflicts have been presented as contingent. The next chapter will explore how these key constellations of national identity have appeared in more contemporary discourses, and how the relationship between 'the people', 'the state' and 'democracy' have shifted or remained the same over time.

6. The Discursive Construction of National Identity in Contemporary Times

6.1. Introduction

The Second Article of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia declares: ‘The sovereign power of the State of Latvia is vested in the people of Latvia.’ Unfortunately, so far, this has only happened one day every four years – the day of parliament’s election. Now, the more conscientious part of the Latvian people with their signatures about organizing the referendum has given an opportunity to establish the power of the people also in the interval between elections. Therefore – uninterruptedly. (Lucāns 2008)

The previous chapter analysed the construction of Latvian national identity in two key periods – first, the first nationalist movement and the foundation of the republic in 1918 and second, the movement for regaining independence from the Soviet Union and the re-establishment of the republic in 1991. The analysis established that in both periods, the nation was constructed by focusing on the signifier of ‘unity’ and posing internal fragmentation and conflict as its greatest threat. No other signifiers have been nearly as successful in constructing Latvian identity. Both during the interwar republic and after re-independence, the state was not included in that unity, except for the authoritarian regime of the 1930s. Instead, state identity was built on the signifiers of ‘democracy’, ‘modernity’ and the ‘universal’ values of humanity. Thus, the link between the nation and the state did not have a positive element of commonality, a hegemonic version of the identity that would include both. At the end of the chapter, I concluded that one of the potential outcomes in this situation was the antagonization of the state. This chapter will argue that this was the outcome of the dominant discursive constellation of collective identity in Latvia after 1993. The following analysis demonstrates how ‘the people’ continually emerge as the locus of unity and moral clarity by being opposed to the corruption and selfishness of politicians. In this political imaginary, politicians attempt to either appeal to this idealized unity of ‘the people’ or to ‘modernity’, which is associated with democracy and belonging to the West. This discursive constellation demonstrates how representative institutions can be rejected in the construction of a democratic identity, and as Lefort argues, how the symbolic position of representation in democracy through the institutional mechanism must be acknowledged in radical democratic perspectives – a point against Laclau’s theory of populism.

The following analysis includes four events from the period 2000–2011, namely, a citizens’ initiative to adopt a law, three referendums, as well as the four most-successful online citizens’ initiatives from the period of 2016–2021. The more detailed explanation of the case selection is provided in the discussion of the method (section 4.4). All of these instances mobilized a large part of the society and in 2011 even resulted in the dissolution of the parliament. All of these

cases illustrate how popular sovereignty is situated vis-à-vis representative institutions in the context of the political issue at hand, along with the position of ‘democracy’ in this relationship.

6.2. The Citizens’ Bill against The Privatization of Latvenergo

At the start of the year 2000, the government of Latvia was moving forward with devising a privatization model for the state-owned electric utility company Latvenergo. This was the period when the privatization process, which had begun in the early 1900s, was ending, and the remaining stage concerned opening the market for the privatization of the large national companies. However, the planned privatization of Latvenergo was stopped through the citizens’ legislative bill, which remains the only case when parliament has followed the lead of such an initiative. The bill was submitted by the Latvian Trade Union of Energy Workers in March 2000 and was supported by the opposition’s Social Democratic Workers’ Party (*Latvijas Sociāldemokrātiskā strādnieku partija*) and the New Party (*Jaunā Partija*). The trade union proposal had to collect enough signatures in two separate stages, which would trigger a referendum if parliament rejected it. After the necessary signatures were collected, the legislative bill was adopted by parliament in August.

The trade union and the opposition parties’ key argument concerned the effect of privatization on the price of electricity. The chairman of the trade union stated that the referendum should be organized because the experience of privatization on the energy sector in Eastern Europe had proven to increase tariffs on the price of electricity (Lukaševičs 2000). The trade union and opposition parties argued that the present privatization model of dividing the company was not favourable to the people and could even terminate supply for more far-away regions (Kuzmina 2000). They made additional arguments about the loss of the state’s economic freedom to foreign investors as well. Those foreign investors would only care about collecting profits, and the investments in the infrastructure would still rely on consumers and taxpayers (Ločmele 2000a). The pro-privatization side argued that opening the electricity market was necessary to reduce electricity prices and that privatization of the large national companies was an integral step in Latvia’s European integration. Minister of Finance Gundars Bērziņš argued that electricity prices in Latvia were already the highest in the Baltic states and that ‘we have only two possible ways: to Europe or to the past that does not exist anymore. [...] But do the authors of the [legislative] proposal even want to belong to the European future? Or maybe their ideals are found in the East?’ (Bērziņš 2000). Quite quickly, the issue of privatization became one of Latvia’s key positions vis-à-vis Europe, since the anti-privatization side also framed their ideas as pro-European, i.e., modern, by emphasizing, for instance, that successful business practices across the world had included amalgamation rather than division of

company assets (Ločmele 2000a). Thus, just as in the period of the independence movement, ‘modernity’ and being ‘European’ were used to constitute a self-representation, which was implicitly or explicitly positioned as more legitimate than any other alternative.

‘The people’ proved to be another central point of the debate’, insofar as privatization was presented as a decision made by the nation, and not by politicians. The politicians and officials were depicted as representing neither one group nor another – they were presented as an isolated group who now had to take ‘the people’s decision into account directly. The key element of the discourse was ‘property’, where Latvenergo was depicted as being owned by the nation, and the government as appropriating the nation’s property. The political discourse reinforced this idea as parties accused their opponents and positioned themselves as the more honest representative of the interests of ‘the people’ as a whole. The opposition parties argued that the government had corrupt ties with foreign investors and that its politicians were looking for ‘cuts’ in privatization deals (Klinšāne-Bērziņa 2000). Opposition-supporting newspaper commentaries and voices from the public viewed the ruling coalition even more critically. The Latvenergo case was seen as just the last of instances in post-independence political processes, which were filled with politicians’ corruption and ‘backdoor’ deals of personal enrichment. One letter to the editor stated:

As long as in our country, the government and the Saeima will manipulate the people and increase their wealth at the expense of the state of its citizens, nothing will change. The majority of the public is obviously not worried that our country is just about to become a ‘banana republic’. The last ten years and the results of ‘economic operations’ clearly indicate this! What remains is to swindle (steal) the last pillars of the Latvian state – Latvenergo, Latvia Shipping Company, Latvia State Forests. (Sproģis 2000)

Though the political elite antagonistically opposed ‘the people’, it was not at all clear with what more concrete identity elements ‘the people’ were actually identified. Instead, the anti-privatization discourse was designed to achieve the simple assertion of the unity of ‘the nation’, of which Latvenergo – ‘our all-common property’ in words of one of the signees of the bill proposal (Ločmele 2000b) – was the central illustration. The opposition parties did not provide particular signifiers of the identification and remained beyond the ‘wholeness’ of the nation they invoked. Elsewhere in the discourse, the opposition’s anti-privatization position was depicted as a partisan strategy for challenging the coalition, which happened to coincide with what ‘the people’ wanted (Avotiņš 2000). The individual citizen was not a prominent figure in any of the discourses regarding privatization. Instead, the main focus was on the people as a whole, who had a seemingly unified will and interests – all of which were seen as being ignored by political representatives. The signature collection on the Latvenergo was presented as a way of signifying the overall protest to government and politicians’ actions.

The pro-privatization side also embraced the argument that politicians were using privatization to fulfil their own personal economic interests, but they directed it towards opposition politicians, claiming that their goal was to take advantage of ‘the pot of privatization’, as was put by the chairman of the Green Party (Kļaviņš 2000). Commentators from privatization-leaning newspapers objected to ‘usurping’ the name of ‘the people’ by the scheming opposition politicians into advance advancing their personal agenda (Rodins 2000). In the newspaper *Diena*, an opinion column stated:

We are being offered a referendum to leave everything as it is, only to pay more for electricity. Instead, we can cherish the illusion that this ‘thriving company’ belongs to us when, in fact, we only own the lats that this giant is successfully and increasingly sucking out from our wallets... The quite understandable desire of a small part of the society to live lavishly at the expense of the rest is positioned as this great concern of the people about the ‘common property of the nation’. (Ozoliņš 2000a)

Since opinion surveys did indicate more than 80% support for the initial bill and against the privatization of Latvenergo, the pro-privatization side somehow had to articulate its position, despite its considerable unpopularity. First of all, according to the government’s position, anti-privatization attitudes were traceable to belonging to the ‘East’, that is, to the backward, soviet past of state planning as opposed to the modern free economy of contemporary Europe. In one newspaper commentary, for example, the nation was depicted as unwittingly trapped in that past, with its ‘still alive socialistic instincts’, acting against its better interest to thwart a successful privatization of the company, which would increase ‘Latvia’s prestige abroad’ (Ozoliņš 2000b). Echoing the Popular Front discourse of the early 1990s, the people were not educated enough to make the right decision, while that decision was, in turn, identified with the affirmation of being ‘modern’ and ‘European’. Though the government’s official stance and pro-privatization discourse beyond politicians’ statements matched, by linking belonging to the ‘West’ with ‘privatization’, respective newspapers were reluctant to be associated with the government and the coalition. As in the anti-privatization discourse, the government and the coalition’s stance was depicted as only incidentally favourable to the nation, since ‘so far, everything is happening in accordance with the laws of nature: politicians are trying to privatize Latvenergo – of course, in their own interests, but as a side effect this also benefits the consumer’ (Kļaviņš 2000).

When the signature collection was completed in July, the number of signees composed 22% of the electorate – more than twice the needed number. Some of the coalition parties decided to switch their position, and parliament adopted the citizens’ bill, thus avoiding the need for the referendum. Overall, the discourse analysis concerning the citizens’ bill on Latvenergo reveals that on both sides of the issue, ‘the people’ was not seen as being represented politically, but as either unmediated ‘wholeness’ or as insufficiently educated to make genuinely democratic decisions. In both cases, politicians appeared to be selfishly interested actors

who were not part of the political unity which was constructed in the discursive field; other actors, such as the trade unions who initiated the bill, were not included in it either. 'The people' were presented as a singular voice beyond any political representation, similar to early independence movement discourse. Another prominent discursive element of the time was the need to validate Latvia's 'modern' and 'European' identity. While the Popular Front of Latvia in the late 1980s had combined both of these elements, here they appeared to oppose each other, since different political positions each identified their own visions with being whatever they meant by 'modern'. The opposition between different projections of 'Europeanness', however, remained in the background, in contrast to the confrontation between 'the people' and 'politicians', for which the Latvian privatization was set to be a symbolic breaking point.

6.3. The President's Veto and The Referendum on State Security Laws

This next case is notable because it was the first time the president used their right to suspend legislation after it had been adopted by parliament and handed over for a potential referendum if the necessary threshold of citizens' signatures was to be achieved. However, it would be imprecise to view this case simply as a conflict between different political institutions and their discretion, since, in my reading, this event fits into the wider discourse about the tension between 'the people' and institutionalized power, as symbolized by politicians. In 2007, President Vaira Vīķe Freiberga suspended legislation that aimed at increasing governmental oversight over state security institutions and creating a new supervisory body, which would be led by the prime minister and five government ministers. Initially, the argument concerned institutional structure and the balance of power, since the president maintained that state security should be overseen by the existing National Security Council, which was headed by the president. At the same time, Prime Minister Aigars Kalvītis argued that the government did not have officially sanctioned control over state security institutions, which would have allowed them to coordinate their work (Libeka 2007). He also argued that the present amendments would make state security coordination by the Latvian government like its Western counterparts. Ultimately, however, the key reason for suspending the legislation was political corruption, with implied accusations that the government would use the proposed amendments to stop undesirable investigations into its members. When the president suspended the legislation on the 10th of March, 2007, her official statement read:

I am ready to render my concerns into words, and that is that there may occur inadequate interference in our investigative processes, which eventually affect either some political groupings or those who financially support them and stand behind them. With my action, I have opened the doors for the nation to collect

signatures, if she [sic] declares it necessary and desirable. I have expressed my concerns; I am turning to both Saeima and the people. (Antonevičs 2007)

This statement is significant, as Vike Freiberga framed her decision as one that should ultimately be made by the people, and almost did not otherwise make any public statements in the debates before the referendum. In turn, her decision to ‘open the doors’ for the people to make a decision directly was greeted with considerable enthusiasm and celebration, leading some to portray the president as truly expressing the will of the people. Reacting to the public outcry after the president’s announcement, parliament rejected the proposed amendments on the 29th of March, but the signature collection for organizing the referendum remained in effect. The necessary threshold – 10% of the electorate – was still met and the referendum took place on 7 July. It failed to secure the necessary quorum, but 338,000 people in total took part, of which 98% voted for rejecting the legislative proposals (Centrālā Vēlēšanu Komisija 2021). The fact that the referendum took place after parliament had already rejected the amendments showed the significance of this particular case in the public discourse.

The principal point of contention at the discursive level was between the two conceptions of democracy: for the opposition and for those public actors that supported the president’s decision, it was the affirmation of the power of ‘the people’ and thus of genuine democracy. For the government and its supporters, the campaign for the referendum was the opposition’s unnecessary and populist attempt to gain leverage, by usurping the rules and norms of normal representative democracy. By identifying with either democracy as a direct expression of the will of ‘the people’ or as a representative model of party politics, ‘the people’ again remained a singular body with no ties to existing political forces and institutions. Opposition parties portrayed the signature collection and the upcoming referendum as a decisive step for the nation to regain its sovereign power from the political elite. The New Era party member Kārlis Šadurskis wrote in an op-ed:

The result of the referendum will show what is the people’s real attitude to democracy. In actuality [it will show], as weird as it might sound, if we need democracy – do we want to decide our fates ourselves or just vote every four years for, as now it is clever to say, the lesser evil, and to complain in-between elections about politicians’ cynicism, arbitrariness and subservience to the oligarchs. (Šadurskis 2007)

The underlying logic was undoubtedly populist in Laclau’s terms. It established the antagonism between ‘the people’ and the elite, but no particular elements were named with which the universality of ‘the people’ would have been identified. The only clear nodal points were the political elites’ general corruption and selfishness that was opposed to ‘the people’ and their democratic identity. The voices from the general public confirmed the same antagonism. In one letter to the editor, a reader wrote:

The state's power in its all-permissiveness and arrogance has reached such a degree that the Constitution, its core value that the power in Latvia belongs to the people, is being ignored. [...] Therefore, this will be the last referendum when the people are given the right to express their opinion, voting for democracy, for the rule of law, against oligarchy, corruption, the rebirth of totalitarianism'. (Vīksnītis 2007)

However, since no political party directly identified itself with 'the people' or claimed to embody the demands and needs of those against the elite, this antagonism was not identified with any concrete demands. As a result, the unity of 'the people' stood as an antithesis to the figure of the 'politician', whether present or past, as a general category in the opposition or in the government. The only political figure that appeared to have any relationship with the nation was the president, who was seen as singlehandedly expressing the will of the people or at least giving them the possibility of expressing their will. In explaining their decision to sign for the referendum, one respondent commented to a newspaper that 'the president considers that now it needs to be shown that also the people have a say' (Rācenis 2007b), while another admitted that 'it was not easy to pull herself together and make such a serious step – to make a step against the Saeima' (Rācenis 2007a). The president was even invited to dissolve parliament since political corruption was so widespread (Rācenis 2007a).

Alongside the general public and the opposition, many cultural figures also saw the referendum as a final instance to assert the power of 'the people', leading them to compare the present political elite with that of soviet times where it 'pretended to not see the growing discontent in the people and the desire for freedom' (Rācenis 2007b). The overarching understanding was thus that this was a democratic, almost revolutionary action by the nation to regain the power and even the freedom of which it had been dispossessed by the political elite; the parallels with the independence movement from the Soviet Union were drawn very directly.

On the opposite end, the referendum and the whole issue was framed as damaging to democracy, by both invoking the opposition's partisan interests and the use of direct democracy as a strategy to thwart the work of the government. The pro-government side thus depicted the calls for referendum as illegitimate and as attempting to claim 'democracy' in order to achieve their own partisan interests. Democracy became the main signifier of contention in subsequent debates. They argued that that the present campaign for a referendum challenged the principles of genuine representative democracy, as it had been established in the constitution and accepted around the world. Aigars Ķīmenis from the ruling Peoples' Party (*Tautas Partija*) wrote the following about the signature collection campaign and the referendum:

The leaders of New Era have grabbed the [last] straw – doubting the legitimacy of the government, organizing legally senseless referendum and interpreting its potential results as the vote of confidence in the government. What they don't understand or pretend to not understand is that these pharisaic games with the most

important principles of the Constitution cripple the understanding of democratic values and undermines trust in democracy in Latvian society. [...] This escapade of the New Era might establish a tradition for the opposition in Latvian political life to start collecting signatures every six or twelve months about any topic, but with one slogan – down with the government! (Kimenis 2007)

The author concluded that the organization of the referendum would be a serious step backward in the development of Latvian democracy and the parliamentary system. In response to the significant support for the organization of the referendum organization and the role of the president in this initiative particularly, a commentator in the newspaper *Neakarīgā Rīta Avīze Latvijai* satirized:

Unfortunately, there is nothing said in the Constitution about the role of a queen or a king, also presidents have only a decorative function, thus the Latvian people must for the time being manage with democratic institutions – the parliament, government – which, however, by all accounts, is corrupted through and through. It is not always clear who and what is being corrupted, but that is not important for fairy-tale stories. To avoid such talks, maybe Latvia needs to return to ancient traditions. Law-making should no longer be trusted to the representatives, but the nation has to decide herself [sic]– have to gather under the holy oaks and vote by raising hands. (Krautmanis 2007)

Both discourses on the referendum made democracy their central signifier, and their conception of it was antagonistic: on one side, it stood for the populist notion of action by ‘the people’, whereas, on the other side, it stood for the normative affairs of the representative system against populist excess. Unlike other similar hegemonic struggles, neither side identified with ‘the people’ directly, but instead presented themselves as the party more faithful to the democratic ideal as it was depicted. Furthermore, echoing the discourse of the independence movement, ‘democracy’ was treated as a signpost towards which the nation was moving and in which the expertise was proven by the participation in the referendum. Even if the discourse emphasized the power of ‘the people’, the ability to assert and express that power was still unresolved, as exemplified by the failure to reach the necessary quorum. In one opinion piece, an author wrote about her observations during the day of the referendum:

Latvia on Saturday indeed looked special – fickle weather, an empty capital city, roads full of wedding-goers⁵. And on a path that goes to the town council – an auntie with a passport in her bag. I remember this auntie with a conviction that the most valuable citizens of Latvia – those who can think – on Saturday went to the polling station. To the parliamentary or municipal elections, one can be driven by a reflex – political parties are fighting for the voters so much that they suddenly feel their value that they want to sell [their vote] favourably. This time, the referendum, accompanied by the ruling parties’ indifference, was a chance to vote that was offered in silence. It was necessary to think. (Pakalnina 2007)

⁵ The referendum took place on 7 July, a popular wedding date that year.

In the end, the discourses continued and expanded the same pattern that was observable during the citizens' bill campaign in 2000. The discursive field was divided between 'the people' and the 'outside', which remained 'corrupt, selfish politicians'. Both categories were presented as fully constituted and, thus, while they usually would uncover the split identification of internal collective identity, in this case, they signified external discursive borders. The contentious signifier was 'democracy' and how it was positioned in relation to the nation. In contrast to the privatization debate of 2000, the question of following the 'right' model of democracy was more central, essentially through the opposition between direct and representative democracy. While 'the nation' was linked with direct democracy, no such relation was established with the representative model in the political discourse, thus creating polarity between 'the people' and democracy as presented in the government's position. At the same time, 'democracy' was still associated with education and competence. Pro-government discourse emphasized the 'normalcy' of representative democracy and depicted the campaign for the referendum as damaging to democratic culture in Latvia. Thus, even if 'the people' were not directly connected to pro-government discourse, it created an important relation with another important element of collective identity by invoking the idea of civilizational belonging.

The discourse that connected 'the nation' and democracy, on the other hand, also invoked a similar educational perspective, only, in this case, it was related to taking part in the referendum and thus affirming the ideal of democracy that it presented. By taking the educational perspective, political actors on both sides were able to construct a certain relation to 'the nation', which did not challenge its borders internally. Democracy was the signifier through which a difference of a political nature could be asserted; however, it didn't involve an attempt to re-articulate a new meaning of 'the people' itself, which was presented as already fully constituted identity.

6.4. The Citizens' Bill and the Referendum on the Dissolution of the Parliament

The following two cases will be analysed together, even though they took place several years apart. They concern two different instances of targeting the same measure of parliamentary dissolution by referendum: in 2008, it was a citizens' bill for easing requirements on the dissolution of parliament, which failed to reach the quorum, and in 2011, the referendum on dissolution was called after the president's initiative. During the period between these two events, the opposition parties, which had so far been integral in articulating anti-government discourse, had acquired a majority and became the coalition leader. Despite this political change, parliament was still dismissed in 2011 by the referendum, in an attempt to oppose the lingering influence of the political oligarchs.

The 2008 bill for the constitutional amendments that would allow at least one-tenth of the electorate to call for the dissolution of the parliament was submitted by the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia. Its chairman emphasized that there were no political parties or groups associated with the bill, but that its goal was to support civic activism in Latvia since political parties ignored the people in-between elections (Krīgers 2008). Political figures continued this argument about the law enhancing democracy in Latvia. Constitutional Judge Gunārs Kūtris wrote the following about citizens acquiring the right to dissolve parliament: ‘it would be a sword of Damocles over the parliament and heads of politicians, which would not allow ignoring the will of the people’ (Kutris 2008). The leader of the opposition’s New Era party Solvita Āboltiņa, stated: ‘the adoption of the constitutional amendments will be insurance, a warning, and a reminder – if deputies forget or ignore the people, it can decide over the dissolution of the parliament because power in Latvia belongs to the people, not political parties’ (Āboltiņa 2008). The referendum was depicted as a significant step towards a more genuine democracy in Latvia. President Valdis Zatlers encouraged participation in the referendum – ‘then really will be a feeling that we in this state – citizens – are those who own the power. Democracy – it means to participate in this process, to go and express your opinion.’ (Egle 2008). Sandra Kalniete, leader of the newly formed Civic Union (a splinter group from the New Era), warned that not passing the amendments would mean ‘a true endangerment of democracy’ and invoked the example of Western democracies, where referendums were not considered anything extraordinary: ‘these are mature democracies, where people know that with the help of the referendum they choose their future and the road on which to go’ (Kalniete 2008).

The ruling coalition responded by presenting the regular process of the representative system instead as genuine democracy. Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis, who took the position after the previous PM Aigars Kalvītis and stepped down in the aftermath of the 2007 protests, said in a statement:

Every two years, every voter can evaluate this or that party, and actively voice their opinion about a party between elections or join a party they support or one they want to support in the future. And, if they are not satisfied with the party’s results, next time, vote for a different one or become a candidate themselves. It is a democratic process. [It is] a creative process with a result, in contrast to the dissolution of the parliament, which is a destructive process without a result. (Vikmanis 2008)

A statement by the Peoples’ Party, who had been the ruling party in recent years, emphasized the external standards of democracy, and directly opposed Kalniete’s point about the use of referendums in mature democracies:

It seems important to us to remind that in other parliamentary democracies the right of the people to call for a snap election is a rare practice; furthermore, where such rights are provided, they have so far not been used. From this, it is possible

to conclude that the parliament's dissolution mechanism is complex enough not to be used as an element of political blackmailing. (*Diena* 2008)

Besides the statements by political actors, the proposed constitutional changes were uniformly celebrated. Cultural figures like writers and other creative professionals evoked parallels between the independence movement and the actions for increasing direct citizens' participation. They compared the government to the Soviet regime in its encroachment upon the dignity of the people and their democratic freedom and self-determination – ‘when we talked among ourselves in a completely different way and about different topics than those talking at the top of power’ (Alehno 2008). The nation had to show that it did not accept ‘the political morale and culture’ of the ‘ruling circles’ (2008). The break between ‘the people’ and the political system was thus understood as total. The only possible way forward was a total systemic change, which was often put in terms of ‘political culture’. It is worth noting that cultural figures were explicitly depicted as moral leaders of the nation during the early 1990s peoples’ movement, which would help to understand the common references to this period among the intelligentsia in twenty-first century Latvia.

‘Voices’ from the general public enthusiastically confirmed and embraced the gap between the political elite and the nation. Especially regarding parliament, the nation’s political representatives were portrayed as idle and with no connection to the people, as a reader put in their letter: ‘in comparison with the bulging and arrogant faces we see in the television every day, it becomes clear that the current political elite in its absolute majority has nothing in common with the Latvian people, except that it lives at our expense’ (*Latvijas Avize* 2008). Politicians were uniformly depicted as ‘voracious and gluttonous’ and ‘trying to hang on to their soft chairs with big salaries’ (Kondrate 2008). Despite the proposed legislative changes, people still doubted whether the dismissal of parliament and new elections would change anything: ‘I don’t believe neither politicians nor parliament and I did not go to the signature collection [...] if there will be a possibility for the people to initiate the dismissal of the parliament, politicians will still know how to bypass the law and use it to their advantage’ (Alehno 2008). Others proposed to go further and make changes to the political system itself in order to allow for more direct decision-making by citizens. A blog post in the newspaper *Diena* stated:

In the Saturday referendum, we will vote for democracy. That is, for the possibility for the Latvian people to have more power, to influence more what is going on in the state. I like this idea very much. I envy Swiss who regularly have opportunities to adopt the laws of own state, not only observe from aside how politicians do it. I would like to have referendums in Latvia much more often, if I would have a possibility to elect the President, Mayor of Riga, etc. A direct election of the Prime Minister and most important ministers could be organized. (Sestdienis 2008)

Apart from formal political statements, the government’s position was not commonly articulated in the political discourse. The exception was the newspaper

Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze, which included commentaries that attacked the proposed amendments as a partisan tool in the hands of the government's opponents. Several illustrative comments were made: 'Latvia is prepared to say goodbye forever to the existing bits of stability in domestic politics and give all legislative power to a constant feast of populism' (Krautmanis 2008); the opposition's 'fight is not about the people, but power. That it is more important to get more followers than increase the quality of the parliament's work' (Avotiņš 2008). Thus, this perspective affirmed the discourse about a traditional representative democracy as a value endangered by the opposition's greed and opportunism. The nation did not conceive so much of a political agent, as it was presented as being duped by the opposition.

If the debate in 2008 was about citizens' right to call for the dissolution of the parliament, in 2011, the referendum concerned the dissolution of parliament – and it was called by President Valdis Zatlers, who used this constitutional right for the first time in Latvia's history. In the parliamentary elections of 2010, the party union known as the Unity, which consisted of the previous opposition parties New Era, Civic Union, and the Society for Political Change – received a record 33 out of 100 seats, with the majority of its parliament members being elected for the first time. As the discourses analysed so far have suggested, this development could be seen as an important step in radically transforming the political system. However, only seven months after the election, in May 2011, president Valdis Zatlers made a televised speech and declared the commencement of the signature collection for a referendum on the dissolution of parliament. The event that triggered Zatlers' call for the dissolution concerned a cross-coalition union between parties that had been associated with oligarchic influences – Union of Greens and Farmers and For Good Latvia. The former was a long-standing coalition party, and the latter was part of the opposition. In May 2011, parliament voted against the warrant to investigate Ainārs Šlesers, an alleged oligarch and an MEP from For Good Latvia; a vote which was secured by the two parties and the opposition's Harmony Centre, which is the so-called Russian-speakers' party. For Šlesers, the refusal to remove the deputy's immunity was, in Zatlers' words, a complete U-turn in Latvian political culture which had been signified by the newly elected parliament and presented the ultimate challenge to the country's democratic future (Zatlers 2011). As the ruling party, Unity supported Zatlers' position on the vote regarding Šlesers and eventually expressed support for the referendum. However, the party made very few statements throughout the campaign. During the snap elections organized in September 2011, Unity lost many of its seats to the newly formed Zatlers' Reform Party, which acquired 22 seats in the extraordinary elections⁶.

The discourses in 2011 repeated many central motifs of the earlier years previously analysed, especially the 2008 referendum. Zatlers described parliament and the political system in general as totally corrupted. The dissolution was an

⁶ Later the party's ratings dropped significantly and, after Zatlers stepped down from an active role in politics, the party joined Unity in 2013.

act of ‘purifying’ members of parliament from corruption and of forcing them to defend ‘state’s interests’, rather than the ‘interests of some groups or even personal interests of some individuals’ (Zatlers 2011). This call to form a united frontier of ‘the people’ was an immediate response that did not require Zatlers to articulate more specific signifiers, as ‘the nation’ was an already given unity. ‘I think that not every generation is given such an opportunity, therefore we need to show politicians that in a democracy the rulers after all are the people,’ stated a student in an express interview to the newspaper (*Diena* 2011). Some proposed simply having a president and the government, and disposing of the parliament altogether (Mediņa and Raita 2011), while others suggested reducing the number of members of parliament from 100 to 50 – so ‘then they would not snooze and make wrong decisions’ (Vikmanis 2011). No suggestions were made regarding the existing political system. Instead, the motif that any continued work would not change the situation reappeared, since even if ‘a party disappears, . . . a new one will appear’ (Vilcāne 2011).

This period did see the opening of a new dimension; for the first time, the president was seen as directly politically representing ‘the nation’ against the ‘political elite’. In 2007, Vaira Vīķe Freiberga only indirectly accused politicians of corruption, but even then, she was portrayed as the visible personalization of the political will of ‘the nation’. This trend reached a certain culmination in Zatlers’s case. Newspapers published enthusiastic expressions of support to Zatlers from their readers. In contrast to almost any other politician, these expressions of support had a personal connection with the people – ‘even if Valdis Zatlers is not re-elected, he will always be the peoples’ president’ (Hailova 2011). The framing of his announcement began to parallel the revolutionary movement moments of national history in its almost mythical proportions. Soon after Zatlers had finished his televised speech, groups of people flocked to the presidential residence to show their support. One of the younger participants remarked: ‘I was not yet born at the time of the “Singing revolution” [reference to the 1980s–90s independence movement], but I was part of this revolution’ (Zālīte 2011). Writer and the former Popular Front leader Marina Kosteņecka argued:

People have been pulled out from some sort of terrible indifference. The lethargy that came from the powerlessness people felt, they didn’t have any hope anymore. Everybody was saying that the fourth ‘Awakening’ is needed. And here it started – with Zatlers dismissing the parliament. (Tocs 2011)

Zatlers’ step was seen as creating a new political culture that ‘we were singing about during the time of the National Awakening – for a democratic state, where each and everyone have their rights’ (Kārklīņš 2011). The leader of the nationalist party All for Latvia! and member of parliament Raivis Dzintars compared the present situation with the unconstitutional dissolution of parliament in the 1930s by then president Kārlis Ulmanis; like then, it was a symbolic ‘breaking point that stopped all the party haggles, the parliament that was not able to ensure what people wanted’ and after which began a ‘time of economic, cultural development

and growth of national consciousness' (Veidemane 2011). Both the discourse of the independence movement that emphasized democracy and the nationalist discourse that emphasized ethnocultural identity were united in 'the people's opposition against the 'politicians'. In contrast to the discourse associated with Ulmanis, however, the dominant discourse viewed the end goal of the break with the previous political order as a step towards a more genuine expression of democracy. The newly elected president Andris Bērziņš welcomed citizens' participation in the referendum and reinforced the notion that 'the Constitution's second article determines that the state's sovereign power belongs to the people of Latvia. And every politician needs to respect that' (Veģe 2011). The ability to make decisions directly and counter the work of the parliament was meant to make people 'more active, participate in non-governmental organizations, express greater interest in political processes, instead of simply criticizing others that they do not do anything and that everything is bad in the country' (Zemblicka 2011).

Zatlers' critics questioned his intentions in calling for the dissolution of the parliament. They mainly argued that he never would have made this step unless he had a chance to be re-elected; thus, his motivation was self-serving under the smokescreen of an 'anti-oligarchic spirit' (Latkovskis 2011). Commentators spoke ironically of how quickly Zatlers' public opinions changed from just recently accommodative positions towards the parliament to suddenly discovering 'the root of all evil – the oligarchs who have stolen democracy' (Lulle 2011c). Most critiques of Zatlers were limited to opinion pieces by the *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze* and they continued the theme of appropriating the name of 'the people' for narrow partisan goals. Overall, from either the coalition or the opposition, politicians were not very vocal during the referendum campaign. While 'Unity' – previously the most vocal opposition party –, supported the president's call, it also did not make many pronouncements during the campaign. Some politicians remarked that Zatlers' decision was sudden and they questioned whether the situation he depicted in parliament was so serious to require such a drastic step. However, statements about the dissolution of parliament remained limited among political actors on both coalition and opposition sides.

A certain opposition to the dissolution of parliament emerged in the public discourse in connection with society-critical attitudes. This perspective refocused on the citizens themselves and their overtly negative perception of politics. As the State Auditor Inguna Sudraba suggested:

The concrete parliament had only worked around eight months. The majority of deputies were just starting to understand the work methods of the parliament – a large part of them did not deserve such an attitude. It is more a [question about] attitude towards authority, politics, and parties generally, not against most concrete individuals. I don't believe that society's attitude towards authority and politics will radically change in a few months. The system of power will not be changed thus also I don't believe that in a few months, the parties will be able to present to society something radically new. (Lulle 2011a)

Newspaper commentators criticized the duality of voters' mindsets, which were marked by the criticism of 'oligarch parties' in conjunction with the continual popularity of actual oligarchs, as a symbol of oligarchy Aivars Lembergs remained a popular Prime Minister candidate (Zanders 2011), and the lack of making clear distinctions between honest and non-honest politicians (Zīle 2011). Some viewed the situation as difficult to solve as it was the decision of the president, not grassroots activists, which had led to the dissolution of parliament (Lulle 2011b). The hopes that were associated with the dismissal of parliament were questioned both in light of citizens' expectations and perceptions of politics, anticipating that because 'neither society nor election requirements or political culture have fundamentally changed,' the outcomes of the extraordinary elections and further parliament's work would likely disappoint the voters.

The debates concerning the dissolution of parliament in 2008 and in 2011 demonstrated that political discourse did not articulate any new elements of political subjectification and reproduced the same narrative of the 'the people' versus the corrupted 'government'. This meant that even if the key actors in political positions had shifted and even if the content of political priorities had changed, the dynamic of the identity construction of 'the people' remained the same, as was the case with its purely antagonistic relationship with institutionalized power. Its key elements were the construction of 'the people' as one totality and 'democracy' as an external signpost towards which the nation had to strive.

The concrete agents who formulated their position politically and who were in the parliamentary opposition differed across time, but their populist logic remained the same. By contrast to Laclau's view of populism, this logic did not establish a political frontier within the political community in Latvia, but rather worked to fix its external borders. While this unity in the name of political protest was affirmed and celebrated in the public discourse, political actors established relations with the community through the signifiers of democracy and modernization – encouraging democratic participation, celebrating democracy as an ideal, etc. In this way, the conflict between different internal actors did not have to challenge the existing frontier of 'the people'. Pro-government discourse also invoked democracy as an ideal. Still, the direct expression of the will of the people here, as articulated by the opposition, was portrayed as partisan-motivated and harmful to the function of representative democracy.

The referendum campaigns of 2000 and 2007 focused on a concrete political issue – a controversial law, while the initiatives to dissolve parliament of 2008 and 2011 had a single direct demand: to recall the government and the parliament. Yet, a clear discursive continuity ran through all of these cases by positioning 'the people' as the democratic, anti-establishment actor and the whole political system as the undemocratic usurpation of the peoples' power. The fact that the actors who occupied the position of the government or the opposition had changed did not matter; the frontier of the conflict remained between 'the people' and 'the politicians', who were continually portrayed as being 'outside' the nation. Instead, the ultimate dissolution of parliament illustrated the crucial feature of the discourses analysed across the period of 2000 to 2011: the distinction between

different political groups and identities mattered little while the populist rhetoric was a powerful device for naming and mobilizing the collective identification of ‘the people’, but not for creating chains of equivalence and new forms of subjectification. In this regard, any expectation of new forms of mobilizing collective identity, even if they centered around the signifiers of ‘the people’ and ‘democracy’, remained frustrated, since discursive construction in the Latvian context did not allow any internal splits to emerge within the community such that they could be addressed on a political stage.

6.5. My Voice Citizens’ Legislative Initiatives: The Property Tax and COVID-19 Restrictions

So far, the analysis has focused on discursive construction in the more and less recent past, how it established several key signifiers and their continuity and change during this time. To see how these discursive structures hold up in the most recent period, I have chosen to focus on successful online legislative initiatives, where citizens collected and submitted signatures. The scale of the online platform My Voice is much smaller than constitutionally established signature collections ever were – the highest number of signatures for an initiative on the platform is currently 58 571, which is roughly a third of the 10% of the electorate that is required for constitutional initiatives. Still, after the requirements for the citizens’ bill were made more complicated after 2012, My Voice appears to have replaced the signature collections and referendum initiatives of the previous years with thematically broader online-based activism. Since the platform started in 2011, 84 of its proposals have been submitted to parliament and other relevant institutions, and 50 of them have been adopted (Mana Balss 2021). The entire year of 2021 saw the launching of 359 citizens initiatives, 124 of which were published for signature collection and 12 which ended up being adopted by parliament (Mana Balss 2021). Overall, successful platform initiatives have continually attracted attention in political discourse, requiring politicians to state their views on the issue and to include them in their parliamentary or municipal policy agenda. More on the selection of these more recent sources of information can be found in the 4.4. (method) section.

This section will examine two cases from My Voice that represent the most successful online legislative initiatives to date: the first initiative concerns abolishing the real estate tax for primary housing, and the second case is comprised of three initiatives regarding COVID-19 restrictions and measures in Latvia. The real estate tax initiative was created in 2016 and remains the initiative with the highest number of signatures (Mana Balss 2021). It was once rejected by parliament in 2018 but was submitted again in 2019 after more signatures were collected. As of the moment of writing this dissertation, this initiative is under discussion in parliament’s commission. The second case is comprised of three initiatives against the government’s measures to restrict the spread of the

COVID-19 virus. The first initiative was ‘Let’s allow children to breathe freely in school’ against the obligatory use of masks in primary schools (Mana Balss 2021a). It collected 29 550 signatures but parliament rejected it. The second initiative, ‘Vaccination still has to remain voluntary’ calls against making vaccination compulsory and has collected 54 192 signatures. Though it was rejected once, it has been submitted to the parliament for the second time (Mana Balss 2021b). The third initiative, ‘For the liquidation of the Vaccination bureau,’ demanded the abolition of a newly established government institution and collected 21 359 signatures (Mana Balss 2021c). The Vaccination Bureau was closed in June 2021, on a legislative proposal introduced by the opposition; however, the public online petition was cited as a justification for the bill. The three initiatives regarding COVID-19 have been viewed as a single case of the societal response to the government’s handling of the pandemic; merging these three instances also allows one to collect more data for analysis.

6.5.1. The Property Tax Initiative

The initiative for abolishing property tax for the only property possessed by an individual was submitted in 2016 by Liāna Hiršsone, who argued that the property tax in Latvia is exceptionally high and endangers the constitutional right to property. By contrast, this type of tax is usually null or very small in European Union member-states (Mana Balss 2021). The fact that the property tax is different in most of the EU was very important and repeatedly brought up as a reason why the government had to change the policy (Karlson and Valdamanis 2016). In her public statements, Hiršsone, a schoolteacher, portrayed the problem as resulting from the ministries’ and bureaucrats’ indifference and ignorance to the problems of regular people, who were losing their ancestral homes and being forced into economic emigration (*Jauns.Lv* 2016a). In her view, politicians and ministry officials have become abusers, who perpetrate the genocide of their own people (*Jauns.Lv* 2016b). Clearly, the antagonistic actor in her statements was the state, ‘which is robbing its own citizens’ (*Jauns.Lv* 2016b). In addition to Hiršsone’s account, several ‘human stories’ appeared in online and print media, which detailed cases of people losing their property or being in dire financial trouble because of the increased tax (Nestere 2017). One commentator even spoke of a case of suicide that allegedly had happened because a family house had been confiscated due to a person not being able to pay the tax (Veidemane 2017).

The polarized relationship with the state has been illustrated by comparisons of the tax policy with ‘nationalization’, suggesting equivalence between the present-day tax system and the Soviet Union, which was used as an example of forceful nationalization of property (Šteinfelde and Zonne 2017). This comparison was evoked not only in newspaper commentator and readers’ opinions but also by the Ombudsman of Latvia Juris Jansons (Jansons 2017).

The political discourse surrounding this issue could be divided into two strains. The first strain was formed by politicians who supported the proposed tax

reduction, the central figure of which was the Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns. While the tax policy was under the jurisdiction of the Finance Ministry, Bordāns argued for the constitutional right which stipulated that every citizen had a right to personal property and called for other solutions to guarantee tax revenue (Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji 2020). In the first responses to the online initiative, most of parliament's parties and responsible ministries were positive, acknowledging that changes in legislation are in fact necessary (Lasmanis 2016). One proposed solution was to freeze cadastral values, whose indexation had increased the property tax. However, the actors involved, such as the ministries and municipal governments, who were directly responsible for the tax collection policies, soon began to push back. The central arguments of the opposing discourse concerned citizens' potential misuse of the tax reliefs, the populism of those politicians who supported the initiative, and citizens' general misunderstanding of the purpose of tax collection. As the representative of the Finance Ministry argued, the best-off citizens could re-register their properties to other family members, and thus avoid paying any tax for extra property (Karlsone and Valdamanis 2016). Yet, blame was not only placed on more affluent citizens but on the general misapprehension about the need to pay taxes. A mayor of Jēkabpils stated: 'to free property from the tax – it, of course, is noble, pretty and nice, but the picture is not as pretty and nice if we need to consider the development and growth of the city' (Grīnbergs 2020). Criticism was directed to citizens' simplified notions of the state budget, where: 'the majority does not pay anything [...] based on the assumption that a state is some abstract formation, where finance minister can just simply take money from the closet and cover all the needs' (Apollo 2020). As the Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development Kaspars Gerhards exclaimed: 'that the entire nation should receive [tax] discounts – that is not possible.' (Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji 2017).

In the public discourse that supported this position, politicians who wished to 'give in' to the people were seen as making a populist attempt to capture votes of the electorate, 'who will vote for anyone who promises to free from the [property tax]' (Dzedulis 2020). Some claimed that the public wanted to avoid paying taxes, which meant that there would not be enough resources to cover various public needs (Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji 2016). The property tax was described as being one of the few taxes which was difficult to avoid, and thus essential for maintaining the public budget (Berga 2019). The initiative remains open, and the legislative project has been subjected to the inter-ministerial negotiation process, while the cadastral values have been frozen until the year 2025, making for a temporary solution to the issue.

Several important discursive insights can be derived from this analysis. On the side of those who demand that the tax policy change, the issue is still articulated in terms of a clear antagonistic opposition between 'the people' and 'the state'; the use of such notions as 'genocide' and 'nationalization' are particularly illustrative. The discourse also focuses on Western Europe as a signifier for the validation of the proposed policy change through references of what is considered to be 'normal', 'proper' policy action. However, significant changes can be

observed on the side of the political and public response to the opposition between the nation and the state. Before, political actors posed issues as being either a democratic expression of the will of ‘the people’ or as populist partisan usurpation against genuine democracy. Now, ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ do not figure in political discourse, and instead, more individualized notions such as ‘society’ and ‘population’ have taken their place. This approach corresponds more to what Laclau describes as a logic of differentiation, as opposed to the populist logic that characterized dominant discourses in Latvia. Thus, it is possible to contrast different groups in society, such as the wealthier ones, against the others, as well as articulate the pushback against citizens avoiding paying taxes. How much the differential logic has substituted the populist logic is a question for further research, but there are indications that a discursive shift is taking place. Still, as the following section illustrates, in the context of the COVID-19 restriction measures, the divide between the ‘government’ and ‘the people’ continues to structure public discourse, as it has also re-invoked different competing articulations of the signifier of ‘democracy’.

6.5.2. COVID-19 Restriction Measures

The three initiatives that address the government’s restrictions to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus are among the most recent and most popular petitions in the My Voice portal. The first initiative ‘Let’s allow children to breathe freely in school’ dates from December 2020 and was created in response to the government’s policy that stipulated compulsory mask-wearing in schools. The authors of the initiative argued that the long period before the regulations came into force indicates that ministers themselves did not believe in the effectiveness of the measure and that masks would limit children’s access to fresh air, thus inhibiting their health and development (Mana Balss 2021a). In response, parliament tasked the government to re-discuss the measure in question. However, the regulation remained in place. The Ministry of Health refuted the claim that wearing masks would affect children’s health in any negative way and emphasized the epidemiological argument for limiting the spread of the virus. My Voice published a statement by physicians of the Children’s Hospital alongside the initiative, which rebutted the claim about masks being harmful for children and described the opposite claim as ‘fake news’. Nevertheless, after a new wave of signatures was collected, the initiative was submitted to parliament for a second time in February 2021 and was again rejected by the government in April 2021. The Ministry of Health and various health experts argued that schools are the primary place for being infected with COVID-19 and stipulated the necessary minimum of new cases per day as the criterion for no longer requiring masks to be worn at school.

The second initiative, ‘Vaccination still has to remain voluntary,’ was submitted on 12 January 2021, and called for a legal norm affirming that vaccination against COVID-19 is non-compulsory. The author of the initiative was concerned

that specific groups such as medical workers and other state workers and employees of certain businesses would be forced to vaccinate. In the initiative, the author argued that compulsory vaccination would discriminate against those who chose not to get vaccinated and to increase their immunity by other means, such as lifestyle changes. Though vaccination remained voluntary, the parliamentary commission accepted the initiative after it was submitted for the second time in July 2021, on the basis that there was ongoing political debate about whether certain professions would require compulsory vaccination. In November 2021, as a response to one of the worst waves of the new COVID-19 cases in Latvia, the government issued regulations that allowed employers to suspend unvaccinated workers. However, the initiative remains open and presumably on the parliamentary commission's agenda.

The third initiative, 'For the liquidation of the Vaccination bureau,' was submitted on the 6th of March, 2021, and proposed abolishing the bureau that had been established earlier that year, which had been tasked with organizing the mass vaccination campaign against COVID-19 in Latvia. The initiative stated that the liquidation would reduce the bureaucracy and ill-considered misuse of the state budget and argued that the bureau's establishment had not achieved its set goals. The employees' salaries were highly publicized at the time when the bureau was established – its director was set to receive just a slightly smaller salary than the prime minister. Health Minister Daniels Pavļuts defended the decision by envisioning the bureau as an institution separate from the rest of the state bureaucracy that needed to attract top professionals to organize the process of mass vaccination (Klūga 2021). During the time when the initiative was published, the majority of respondents to a survey about readiness to vaccinate were either still waiting to make the decision about vaccination (36%) or did not wish to vaccinate at all (28%) (Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji 2021). Alongside the My Voice initiative, a member of parliament from the Harmony Centre Jūlija Stepaņenko submitted a legislative proposal to liquidate the Bureau, which was supported by the opposition (Apollo 2021). In mid-March, the Bureau was reorganized and included in the existing structure of the National Health Service. In April, the My Voice initiative was nevertheless submitted to parliament. The author commented that reorganization is a 'spit in the face' to the people who wanted the Bureau liquidated (Mana Balss 2021c). At the end of April, parliament adopted the opposition's legislative proposal to liquidate the Bureau, tasking the government to do so by the 1st of June, 2021.

The debate over the first two initiatives about mask wearing and compulsory vaccination was largely limited to statements made by the authors of the initiatives and the response from the responsible political institutions. Thus, debate was not very extensive and put forward relatively few arguments. Yet, some on-line media articles were specifically dedicated to relevant commentaries and posts from social media – for instance, the investigative journalism centre Re:Baltica, as part of its 'Re:Check' series that fact-checks viral social media posts, tackled a popular social media post that said: 'Dear fellow-Latvians, what do you say? Maybe all of us should take to the European Court Pavļuts and Kariņš [the prime

minister] for human rights abuse? Compulsory vaccination is genocide of the Latvian nation' (Bērziņa 2021). While no regulations about compulsory vaccination have been issued, posts like the one quoted began acquiring popularity on social media (Bērziņa 2021).

The two crucial elements that re-appeared in the discourse were the reference to norms in European, implicitly, 'developed' states and the expression of democratic rights. Though other online platforms like Re:Baltica identified and analysed relatively widespread disinformation on social media – for instance, vaccination conspiracy theories –, the My Voice initiatives emphasized human rights and democratic rights to refuse government-issued regulations while also invoking the experiences of other, implicitly exemplary, democracies. In the call for the initiative against compulsory vaccination, the author stated that 'it is against the free will of a person' and that 'society has to learn to respect different opinions [...] it is necessary to learn to take responsibility for oneself and through that for a society as a whole, how it is in the very democratic Sweden' (Mana Balss 2021b). A number of the My Voice users complained about the government's rejection of the initiative against wearing masks in primary schools, questioning 'is that a democracy, where 10 000 or 20 000 signatures are not taken into account'? The platform's official answer was that the process of signature collection and the discussion of the issue, even if the political response was negative, was a feature of democracy (Mana Balss 2021b). The reference of the experience of other European states was an important argument that was used by both supporters of the initiatives and their opponents. For instance, both the author of the initiative and the Ministry of Health compiled a list of countries that illustrated their respective arguments for and against wearing masks in schools (Kuzmina 2020).

Overall, the political discourse responded to initiatives regarding COVID-19 restrictions with the same references to democracy and external validation. Regarding the vaccination, representatives from ministries and politicians emphasized that vaccination should not be required by any employer, and that if such requests are made, citizens can submit their complaints to the Ombudsman. The Ministry of Defence made the following statement: 'National armed forces respect the core values of the rule of law. Every soldier, just like any Latvian citizen, has a right to participate in the democratic process, including turning to law enforcement institutions' (Vīksne 2021). Though experts acknowledged that a norm about compulsory vaccination could be legally enforced, the political response was very careful to emphasize the voluntary element. Conversely, in twice defending the decision to reject the initiative against mask-wearing in schools, the Minister of Health Pavļuts argued that 'there have been many countries in the world that have implemented similar measures' (Lasmanis 2020).

The third initiative for the liquidation of the Vaccination Bureau re-invoked the theme of political corruption that had been less present in other contemporary discourses. In this case, the primary focus was the Bureau employees' relatively large wages that, as the author of the initiative emphasized, were paid with taxpayers' money. The opposition deputy Jūlija Stepaņenko was much more direct

when addressing the Ministry of Health: ‘The only thing you can think about is your wallet and your own ass. This is the only thing that worries you in this so-called pandemic, taking care of your...guys...your “buddies”’ (Apollo 2021). Public discourse supporting this position echoed these very same arguments – the Bureau was described as a scheme for channelling away money and questioning whether existing employees were not able to fulfil the necessary tasks now delegated to them (Veidemane 2021). In describing the costs of special vaccination information material that the Vaccination Bureau planned to disseminate across the country, a newspaper commentator wrote: ‘it is doubtful that it will be enough – how else politicians and their associates will be able to put money in their pockets if the publication will cost so little?’ (Krautmanis 2021). The establishment of the Bureau was depicted as a means of fulfilling politicians’ personal interests such as getting vaccines earlier – specifically emphasizing that it was not a special interest of the Health Ministry towards the lives of citizens in the times of pandemic that motivated the decision (Zīle 2021).

The government’s general response was apologetic and, though it did not criticize the work of the Bureau, it did not explicitly oppose the aforementioned discourse either. Though Minister of Health Pavļuts disagreed with criticisms of the Bureau’s work and noted ‘in all respects, we are progressing’ with vaccination, he acknowledged that My Voice as along with other ‘negative reactions in society’ had impacted the decision to reorganize the Bureau (Kolāte 2021). Prime Minister Kariņš explained the public’s negative reaction in its disappointment with the government during the pandemic, in more general terms (Feldmanis 2021). Concerning the Bureau employees’ salaries, Pavļuts compared them with the current wage levels of similar positions in the field but agreed that after the reorganization, the salaries would be equalized to the current levels of state employee salaries (Lasmanis 2021a). However, the parliamentary opposition did not fully accept the reorganization of the Bureau as a solution. The Chairman of the Harmony Centre Jānis Urbanovičs commented as follows: ‘The nation has declared that this “plaything” that Pavļuts came up with is good for nothing. Also, he has acknowledged it, though in a very weird way. He should have stepped down’ (Lasmanis 2021a). During the parliament’s discussion of the My Voice initiative later in April, both the coalition and opposition deputies refused to accept the reorganization of the Bureau as equivalent to its liquidation as was demanded in the citizens’ petition, arguing that the previous work of the Bureau had not justified its existence and that the use of taxpayers’ money in its establishment should be reviewed (Lasmanis 2021b). Ultimately, parliament voted for the Vaccination Bureau to be liquidated, even in its re-organized form, which the Health Ministry was tasked to undertake by the 1st of June.

The debate over COVID-19 measures and restrictions revealed that ‘democracy’ continued to be a signifier of external recognition, and, to a lesser degree, of ‘corrupted politician’. The central argument either against or for the restrictions was the emphasis on the external validation of the proposed norms, which was also posed as the validation of being a ‘proper’ democracy. In this regard, the way in which the author of the anti-vaccination initiative framed their demand

for the government to respect both individual freedom, responsibility, and implicitly the epidemiological approach as it is in ‘the very democratic Sweden’ is illustrative. Both public and political statements used ‘democracy’ to validate the position they were defending, compliance with the best democratic standards being the decisive factor for the approval of the proposed action. Regarding the Vaccination bureau, the motive of antagonizing the government that was stealing from ‘the people’ returned in the discourse; however, in contrast to the earlier period, it seemed to now form just one of possible perspectives and was not as dominant as it had been previously. Still, in parallel to the discourses of the 2000–2011 period, politicians did not directly appeal to ‘democracy’; instead, it served as a signifier to mobilize ‘the people’ against ‘the government’. Thus, antagonism against the state through the idealized notion of democracy could very well continue.

6.6. Conclusions

The previous chapter concluded that the construction of national identity in Latvia has not articulated a successful hegemonic version of the relation between ‘the people’ and ‘the state’ – except for the authoritarian regime in the 1930s. At the same time, ‘democracy’ has signified belonging to the Western, ‘civilized’ world, which was a strong motivation during the first republic in 1920s–30s but became even more central during the re-independence movement of the 1980s–90s. In the early 1990s, democracy was connected with ‘modernity’ and being ‘Western’ in a way that continued the negative perspective of earlier periods, where these notions were associated not with positive identity characteristics but with the affirmation of *not* being backward and uncivilized. Since 2000, the link between democracy and external recognition has continued, but it has acquired a particular formulation in the competition between political and public actors. On the one hand, democracy has been connected with the organic unity of the nation through articulating ‘the people’ as a singular political actor manifested in direct citizen mobilization initiatives against ‘the government’. On the other hand, and in the opposing discourse, democracy has been connected with the established norms of Europeanness and ‘normality’. However, neither discourse has rejected the organic unity of the nation or the value of democracy and its association with external validation. The continuity of democracy being linked with external validation and legitimacy substituted the political struggle over particular demands, allowing to maintain the construction of ‘the people’ as a one totality.

In the present chapter, I used and extended Laclau’s consideration of Eastern European populism into a deeper analysis of the case of Latvia. My argument is that this perspective is insufficient for interpreting the dominant attitudes towards representative institutions in Latvia. The negation of representative institutions and the rejection of representation while embracing the democratic sovereignty of ‘the people’ through the references to direct democracy in Latvia is better addressed with Claude Lefort’s notion of the democratic place of power. Lefort’s

framework can account for the tension between different self-representations of power in Latvia and the implications of the struggle between them. Representative institutions in the Lefortian sense keep the 'place of power' empty, while at the same time instituting the horizon for collective action – the main subject matter for Laclau's approach to democracy. Latvia's case demonstrates that it is not easy to maintain the link between emancipation and 'the people' if the structural condition of democracy – which Lefort identifies with representative institutions – is not included in the construction of political identities.

The initial question was that of how Latvia's long-term political distrust and anti-government rhetoric could be seen from a Laclauian perspective. In Laclau's argument, Eastern Europe has been characterized by ethnopopulism, which formed through the antagonism between the ethnic nation and its external other, with the state having a more latent relation to collective identity construction. By contrast, Laclau's normative interest in populism was in its democratic extension of equality linked with its particular logic of constructing the identity of 'the people'. On the surface, the centrality of 'the people' in Latvian discourse, and the way it has been antagonistically positioned towards the political system, seemed to illustrate precisely such logic. However, as my analysis reveals, in a number of instances where popular sovereignty has clashed with the authority of the representative government, a different logic has been at work. Though rhetorically key signifiers of the populist logic were present, these signifiers did not articulate any new political subjectivities, but rather continued to reproduce the idea of organic unity. At the same time, in contrast to the notion of ethnopopulism, the constitutive other was not ethnic minorities and/or outsiders but the state and the political system.

In Laclau's theoretical perspective on populism, 'the people' is the central signifier for the democratic logic of identity construction. Democracy, per Laclau, can be organized around two extremes – on the one side, it is the universality of the community, without hierarchies and distinctions (Laclau 2001, 4). On the other end, there is extension of equality through the constitution of differences in the social and economic spheres, or based on gender and race. (Laclau 2001, 4). As Laclau writes, the first extreme falls into the danger of 'asserting an *unmediated* universality which, however, can only be obtained on the basis of *universalizing* some particularities within the community' (Laclau 2001, 4). Regarding the second logic, the emphasis on difference can threaten to assert that same unity that is needed to challenge existing and deeply entrenched borders of identity. The main point regarding democracy is that 'it requires unity, but it is only thinkable through diversity' (Laclau 2001, 4).

Latvian discourse on democracy is very much characterized by unity, while diversity, through the reference of particular elements within the community, is not present in the articulation of 'the people'. Meanwhile, while there is a strong emphasis on 'unmediated universality', democracy in the Latvian discursive context has also been linked with the perceived norms of external recognition. In the interwar republic, being 'modern' was associated with including different liberal norms in the constitution; the independence movement of the 1980s emphasized

‘universal’, ‘humanist’ norms that pertained to ‘civilized’ nations all around the world; in the debates from the recent past and in contemporary discourses, a mere reference to something being ‘democratic’ can serve to validate a political position, or even positions directly opposed to each other. The way democracy has been articulated, however, has been more negative: functioning as a stamp of approval without any particular positive content by itself. In other words, ‘democracy’ has been positioned in a way that has not politicized or pluralized the political space and the self-representation of power as embodied in the ‘people-as-one’.

These discursive formations have conditioned a relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the state’. On the one hand, the identity of the state is in tension with the organic unity of ‘the people’, since it institutes the space of different representations for ‘the people’. In the Latvian context, the conception of ‘the people’ is incompatible with Lefort’s notion of the ‘empty place’ of power, which institutes the gap between the representation of society and the factuality, which is never fully representable. On the other hand, ‘democracy’ implies a link with political institutions and actors, since they factually embody the political sovereignty of ‘the people’; a condition, which has not been explicitly rejected by any dominant political discourse. However, the discourse analysis of the present chapter shows that political actors do not claim to represent, or rather, embody ‘the people’. Instead, they articulate political identities based on an appeal to a ‘purer’ expression of democracy, while decrying opponents’ attempts as inauthentic in this regard. No hegemonic articulation of ‘the people’ has been connected with the representative apparatus, since the political actors who could construct a totality by ‘*universalizing* some particularities within the community’ (Laclau 2001, 4), have opted to continue asserting the unmediated, fully constituted unity of ‘the people’. At the same time, the model of representative democracy has not been rejected, as it is connected with modernity and Europeanness – the issue is that it simply has not yet been implemented in the ‘right’ way. Thus, the link between the ‘people-as-one’ and ‘democracy’ is constituted in a symbolic way. A balance, which is almost impossible from Lefort’s point of view, is achieved, where political representation exists *de facto*, but is rejected on the ideational level in order to retain the ideal of the ‘people-as-one’. However, this does not mean that the balance is harmonious – since it is, after all, impossible.

Instead, as has been illustrated in a continuous discursive theme across the whole period analysed in this chapter, the emptiness of state identity has been filled with the ubiquitous idea of corruption by ‘politicians’, which appears to be a symbolic rather than ontically concrete category. In the reappearing motif, politicians, and especially members of parliament, are greedy and have no other motivation than to use their official position for personal enrichment. The ‘people’ is depicted as so fully present on the political stage that, when it is invoked in the political discourse, the role of political representatives such as parliament members indeed appears superfluous. The figure of ‘politician’ ultimately stands between the ideal of the people–state relationship and the reality of the present, which can never satisfy that ideal. The difference, however, is visible between

representatives such as members of parliament and political figureheads such as presidents. The public response to Vike Freiberga and Zatlers, when they were positioned to take a stand against and ‘punish’ the parliament, was unequivocally positive. The president can embody the ‘oneness’ of the people on the political stage, which the discourses of 2007 and 2011 illustrate.

The disconnect between the institutional and non-mediated self-representations of power in Latvia helps to understand why there has been a consistent gap between the public and the political class, as various surveys and opinion polls have indicated. However, it is important to understand that discursive formations on this scale do not offer a simplified matrix for analysing or even predicting day-to-day political processes and their results. Also, it does not mean that actual corruption cases and other political failings are deemed insignificant. The point here is that there are discursive structures regarding the ‘people’, ‘democracy’ and ‘state’ that are so deeply entrenched that they condition the construction of other potential political subjectivities. From the Laclauian view presented here, the problem in Latvia has been the absence of a genuine internal frontier within the community that would build a new coalition of actual demands under the signifier of ‘the people’. As the next and final chapter will argue in more detail, the empirical analysis of Latvia illustrates that representative institutions have a role which transcends their identification with liberalism. Their significance, as argued by Lefort, should receive more attention in the post-foundationalist, radical theorizing of democracy.

7. The Position of Representative Institutions in Radical Democratic Theory: Lessons from Latvia

This study was concerned with the broader problem of the contemporary tribulations and the future of representative democracy. In this regard, the study focused on the trajectories chartered by radical democratic theory and the issue of insufficient normativity for which it has been critiqued. Though many radical perspectives have been committed to the goal of extending equality through the political sphere, normative democratic theorists have taken issue with the lack of clear criteria of democratic and undemocratic forms of representation. This problem has especially been attributed to radical democrats' indisposition towards liberal democratic institutions. Meanwhile, radical theorists have emphasized the underlying post-foundationalist ethos that guides their theorizations of democratic politics. From this perspective, to look for vantage points of legitimacy external to the political process means imposing an essentialist ontology upon politics. Some theorists, like Lisa Disch, have offered to take radical perspectives on their own terms, without postulating a goal to fit with the requirements of more normatively orientated frameworks. Taking the above-described debate as a starting point, the aim of my dissertation has been to identify an alternative direction, which does not shy away from the normative dimension, but also does not abandon the post-foundationalist commitment to the principle of the absent grounds of the social.

The theoretical chapter of the dissertation introduced the 'representative turn' in democratic theory, which combines a variety of approaches with a common focus on political representation as being inherent to democracy. This paradigm was outlined in the context of several prevailing perspectives in political science which view representation as a purely procedural mechanism and the history of political thought, where representation has most often been opposed to democracy. However, the so-called 'representative turn' did not signify a uniform approach: one of the most important dividing lines in the turn was that between radical constructivists, who ascribed an ontologically constitutive function to representation, and the more mainstream normative theorists, who did not go as far in conceiving the role of representation. This underlying aspect of the divide demonstrates the fundamental difference between those political theorists who seek to establish certain normative criteria for assessing democratic legitimacy, and those who find such an imperative incompatible with their philosophical perspective.

In the dissertation, my goal was to demonstrate the potential of Claude Lefort's conceptualization of the place of power to productively address this conundrum. Lefort's notion did not ascribe any particular content to power: as he argues, it lies 'behind the theoretical constructs and advances in philosophical thought' (Lefort 1988, 217). The key normative criterion regarding democracy in Lefort's

thought comes through ‘fixing’ the place of power along with the institutionalization of conflict that is symbolized by representative institutions. In this reading, institutions do not have any inherent link with liberal democracy – they only constitute a particular space of the political by virtue of their existence, but not by their content. This space is specific to modern democracy – the distance between ‘the people’ as a locus of power and of ‘the people’ as represented in their different concrete, ontic versions. Though Lefort’s work is well-recognized in continental political philosophy, this facet of his work appears to have been underemphasized in relation to radical theoretical perspectives on democratic institutions.

This lack of reflection on representative institution in radical democratic theory appeared especially conspicuous to me when applied to the empirical context with which I was familiar and which I studied in depth – Latvia. The Latvian case signified a wider trend in the region of Eastern Europe of low trust in representative institutions, especially parliament, and the prevalence of discourses concerning politicians’ widespread corruption. The existing literature on this topic explains this trend in terms of economic dissatisfaction with the transition process, the continuity of the rent-seeking elites, the ways in which the communist regime instilled anti-political sentiments in large parts of the population, and, finally, a political culture that has not yet become fully liberal. However, as I discussed in the 2nd chapter, empirical research did not always confirm such explanations, especially concerning the link between economic development, institutional consolidation, and further liberalization. Thus, the difference of ‘culture’ between Eastern and Western Europe remained the most significant explanatory factor, a viewpoint in Eurocentric literature on the democratization of Eastern Europe with a long legacy in Western European perspectives on constructing ‘Eastern Europe’ as its less-developed, still immature counterpart. Applying and analysing radical democratic perspectives in the context of Latvia enabled me to both connect to the dominant paradigms that had been applied to the region at large, while also subjecting the radical perspectives to a review in a context where they had been applied less often.

To further examine the position of representative institutions in radical democratic theory, I focused on Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism and its associated framework of hegemony and antagonism in his collaborations with Chantal Mouffe. Laclau’s work, especially regarding populism, certainly belongs to the current of radical democratic thought that focuses on the extra-institutional side of politics. The centrality of ‘the people’ in Laclau’s perspective and the way he opposes popular politics to any existing political system poses the question about the role ascribed to existing democratic institutions. Since Laclau is one of the emblematic authors of radical democracy, I aimed to critically question the normative perspective on political institutions one finds in his work on populism and the construction of popular identity positions. My intention was to develop the critique from within the radical democratic view, while at the same time further reaffirming the role of representative institutions. In empirical terms, I drew on Laclau’s categories for analysing the construction of ‘the people’ in

Latvia and exploring the relationship of ‘the people’ with ‘the state’ and ‘democracy’. Laclau provided some starting points in his brief discussion of East European ethnopopulism in his book *On Populist Reason*. For Laclau, Eastern Europe – based upon references to countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and, most often, Yugoslavia, – appeared to embody the essentialist paradigm in constructing popular identities.

Laclau defines populism as a political logic that institutes new political subjectivity instead of reproducing an existing social reality that has become unresponsive to a range of social demands (Laclau 2005, 117). This logic requires constructing an internal division and ‘identification of an institutionalized “other”’ (Laclau 2005, 117) that occurs through a radical re-imagining of ‘the people’. ‘The people’ as the central agent of democratic sovereignty is a locus for articulating a new unity for the different social demands that are connected by their being frustrated with an existing system. To this logic of popular identity construction, Laclau opposed the ethnopopulism of Eastern Europe, which focused on an imagined pre-given unity of a community instead of displacing it through the drawing of a new internal frontier (Laclau 2005, 197). This, in turn, has fundamentally upset the mobilization of populist movements (in the Laclauian sense) in the region.

As my analysis of the national discourses in Latvia demonstrated, Laclau’s analysis is certainly empirically justified. ‘The people’ were predominantly presented as an unmediated, fully present body, without any internal splits or potential conflicts. In Laclau’s reading, this was possible because across Eastern Europe, national identities were built by opposing them to the ethnic ‘other’, be it internal or external. However, the same analysis showed that the ethnic ‘other’ rarely appeared in discourses on power, democracy and the state, which were at the centre of debates about and attempts to exercise direct democracy in Latvia. This is not to imply that ethnic otherness is not present in the construction of Latvian national identity. The ‘unity’ referenced in the texts very likely did not include ethnic Russians and other ethnic non-Latvians that live in Latvia. As discussed in the 5th chapter, the elements which have been used to define ‘the Latvian nation’, show that the dominant conception of national identity in Latvia has been structured around ethnocultural markers. Rather, ethnic otherness did not appear in the discourses analysed here because in the imaginary of democracy and the state, the ethnic ‘other’ does not appear, except in situations when the notion of ‘the state’ has to confront it directly. This happened in referendums and other debates that concerned the use and the status of the state language, while in other instances, the ethnically defined ‘other’ had no visible bearing on the debate.

Even though the ethnic ‘other’ has had a less significant role in the discourse on the state and democracy, there certainly has been a different ‘other’, namely, the political representatives in the broad sense, including the government and the parliament; that is, all of the institutions that symbolically embody the sovereignty of the people. My discourse analysis demonstrated that this institutionalized representation of popular sovereignty has been endowed with a largely negative role. However, this did not mean a simple rejection of democracy. On the contrary,

‘democracy’, which is linked with progress and belonging to the West, has been taken to be a positive signifier. The problem has been in the implementation of democracy by political representatives, which have only one identity – that of selfish and corrupted politicians. The exercise of direct political participation was presented as the only alternative to regain power and realize a more authentic form of democracy, albeit briefly.

The analysis of Latvian political discourses shows that, in contrast to Laclau’s reading of ethnopopulism, the unity of ‘the people’ in Latvia has been defined by an opposition between the people and political representatives. The history of this discursive opposition dates as far back as to the first republic before the Second World War, where democracy was frequently positioned in an antagonistic relationship to the people as ‘borrowed’ or ‘foreign’ to the ‘authentic spirit’ of the nation. In the period since re-independence, however, democracy and its association with modernization and becoming Western has been invariably linked with ‘the people’, creating a tension between institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of popular sovereignty. Through the reference to democracy as an ideal expression of the voice of ‘the people’ and the antagonization of representative politics, it has been possible to maintain the unity of ‘the people’ as pre-given and pre-constituted to escape the need for any internal split that would be required by any constitution of new political subjectivities, as envisaged by Laclau. Instruments of direct democracy, such as referendums and signature collections, do not disrupt the idea of the singularity of the people’s will; instead, they have continually been presented as an alternative that can replace the representative system of political decision-making.

Laclau rejects any attempt to situate social entities outside of discourse, which also applies to political institutions. Since the meaning of such entities is the result of a hegemonic struggle, bodies such as representative institutions will be articulated by discourse and thus always incorporate the subjectivity of a particular hegemony. Furthermore, any hegemony is associated with a certain horizon of universality that effectively masks its partial nature. However, as critical reappraisals of Laclau’s normative premises regarding democracy have suggested, one may pose the question of how democracy can be distinguished from any other regime that employs the same mechanism of hegemonic construction. This question concerns not only the difference between political regimes, but about qualitative differences within a democratic system. Thus, in Latvia, ‘democracy’ is undoubtedly a positive signifier that symbolizes advancement, modernization, and belonging to the ‘civilized’ part of the world – however, the construction of new political subjectivities has stalled due to the relation which has been constructed between democracy and the unity of ‘the people’. In Laclau’s approach, it is not possible to articulate an antagonistic frontier within an identity that does not allow its elements to be internally displaced.

Latvia’s case affirms the arguments of those representation theorists who are sceptical about direct democracy as a corrective to the ills of representative democracy. Furthermore, radical democrats certainly more often embrace mobilization ‘on the streets’ and direct, extra-institutional action by the citizens, which is

understandable in the context of their critique about institutional enforcement of the neoliberal hegemony. Since representative institutions have mainly been associated with liberal democracy, they have served as a critical target to the majority of radical democratic perspectives. Much of that critique has raised extremely important points about liberal democracy lulling citizens into political apathy and alienation from decision-making over their own lives. This critique is voiced by Marxist and post-Marxist authors as well as authors such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Hannah Arendt, Sheldon Wolin, Richard Rorty, among others. One of the central sentiments of radical democratic theory can thus be encapsulated by the following question – can representative institutions ever be anything else than a substitute for an active, purposeful political life of engaged citizens?

Yet Latvia illustrates that ‘the people’ cannot be a fully emancipatory category if it is not also productively connected with representative institutions. This case demonstrates that it is challenging to maintain emancipation and openness if the structural condition of democracy – identified with representative institutions by Lefort – is not included in the construction of political identities. The role of institutions is not to create a compromise with the liberal system, as ‘democratic paradox’ theorists such as Mouffe have argued. Lefort’s framework can help to better explain the tension between different self-representations of power in Latvia, and the implications of the struggle between them. Representative institutions in the Lefortian sense have their own specific, but ‘empty’ role – they only institute the horizon for collective action, the content of which will depend on particular historical contexts. However, for the space to be democratic, the symbolic role of institutions is invaluable. Latvia’s articulation of the total presence of ‘the people’ in politics might not apply to many other contexts. However, it does very well illustrate how representative institutions can be compromised even within discourses of democratic self-representation. Thus, even if radical perspectives often justly focus on the popular and direct mobilization of citizens, these theoretical and practical projects also have to pay more attention to the democratic function of institutions.

Lefort’s perspective explains why, despite the discursive rejection of representative institutions in Latvia, the democratic system has, at least so far, not succumbed to a single ethnopopulist political force, as Laclau’s analysis would have predicted. This does not mean that there are no political actors of this kind, but it would not be correct to say that any single party has taken an all encompassing hegemonic hold over the Latvian political system. While the ethnic divide has been a central issue, the Latvian political landscape is also characterized by political fragmentation and the constant emergence of new parties that are capable of winning seats in the parliament (Ikstens 2019; Eihmanis 2019). The more recent development, which has not been analysed in this thesis, but does certainly connect with the discourses identified here, is the emergence of certain new parties in the 2018 and, most recently, in the 2022 parliamentary elections. In contrast to the discourses analysed in this dissertation, these new parties did not hesitate to speak in the name of ‘the people’, which, as we saw, was not the case before. Earlier, political parties criticized their opponents for being corrupt

and only interested in their own power, but they didn't explicitly critique the representative system itself. In 2018, one of the winning political parties, which received 14.3% of the votes and with the apt name 'Who Owns the State?' (*Kam pieder valsts?*), built its campaign on the promise to downsize the government. The party's PM candidate Aldis Gobzems claimed 'that the coalition will be created not with other parties, but with the Latvian people' (Bertule 2019). 'Who Owns the State?' split soon after joining the coalition, but the discourse it introduced did not disappear. In the last elections held in 2022, some newly established parties presented a similar message to Latvia's Russian-speakers (Luika 2022).

'Who Owns the State?' brought a unique mutation of an anti-elite, anti-corruption discourse into anti-representative democracy discourse and onto the political stage. So far, this has not resulted in such actors having any long-term hegemonic success, but it certainly does raise questions for the future. The context of world politics and the increasing legitimacy of actors who claim to unambiguously embody the voice of 'the people' will likely play a role in this as well. Yet, in the context of Lefort's account of representation, the important factor is that while political parties in the past have accepted the 'oneness' of 'the people', they have not questioned the institutional mechanism of democracy. This has meant keeping the basic condition of institutionalized conflict in place, again affirming the relevance of Lefort's reading of representative institutions as constituting the place of power.

The post-foundational perspective rejects the universalization of political systems and institutions in favour of an openness and undecidability which is inherent to the plurality of human life. In this context, democracy signifies a historical turn of the institutional embodiment of that undecidability – a key point for Lefort. Crucially, this does not mean simply affirming liberal democracy. Rather, following Lefort, one must recognize democracy as a particular historical stage of modernity, of which liberalism is one interpretation – a point that Laclau and Mouffe would agree with – and representative institutions its key symbolic embodiment.

For future research in this direction, it will be crucial to recognize that representative institutions cannot be reduced to setups which are historically associated with democracy, such as party-led elections and politics, existing parliament systems and the hierarchical division of public administration and government. Radical democratic thought has to go further and imagine new ways in which, to quote Pierre Rosanvallon, modern democracy can be staged (Rosanvallon and Goldhammer 2008). Representative institutions are more than just their traditional forms; their purpose is to continually displace the assumed direct presence of 'the people', while maintaining the horizon of the unity embodied in the notion. Despite the continuous lament of the decline of democracy, its new and hopefully better versions may very well be just ahead of us.

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Kokkuvõte eesti keeles

Pealkiri: Esindusinstituutide rolli ümberhindamine radikaalse demokraatia teoorias: demokraatliku identiteedi konstrueerimise õppetunnid Lätist

Käesolev doktoritöö panustab arutellu esindusdemokraatia kriisi üle ja konkreetsemalt esindusinstituutide rolli üle selles protsessis. Seda tehakse radikaalse demokraatia perspektiivi taaselustamise kaudu ning analüüsid demokraatlikku rahulolematust taasiseseisvumise järgses Lätis. Ehk teisisõnu: see doktoritöö analüüsib esindusinstituutide rolli ja tähendust demokraatias Läti rahvusliku identiteedi diskursiivse konstrueerimise juhtumiuuringu kaudu, asetades selle diskussiooni omakorda laiemasse debatti poliitilistest instituutidest radikaalse demokraatia teoorias. Esindusinstituutid samastatakse sageli mehhanismide ja tavadega, mis kinnistavad liberalismi ja kaasaegse lääne riigi tekkimisel, kus perioodiliste valimiste kaudu võimule tulnud poliitilised esindajad on volitatud tegutsema kodanike nimel. Käesolevas doktoritöös püüan edendada ontoloogilist arusaama esindusinstituutidest, mis põhineb demokraatia struktuursel tingimusel, milleks on poliitilise korra kindla aluse puudumine. Teisisõnu, ontoloogilist mõõdet iseloomustab ilmsete objektide ja subjektide puudumine; nii objektsus kui ka subjektsus tekib representatsiooniprotsessis (Marchart 2007; Thomassen 2017). Väitekiri paigutub postfundamentalistlikku perspektiivi, kus poliitika omandab ontoloogilise tähenduse, sest sellest saab fookuspunkt, milles ühiskond pidevalt (taas)loob arusaama iseendast (Lefort 1988; Ankersmit 2002; Laclau 2005).

Doktoritöö esimeses, sissejuhatavas peatükis, selgitan, et radikaalne demokraatia põhineb suuresti liberaalse demokraatia kriitikal, mida majandushuvide domineerimise tõttu nähakse võimetuna saavutama võrdsuse ja õigluse eesmärgi (Trend 1996; Little ja Lloyd 2008). Radikaalset demokraatiat on kujundanud ka dekonstruktivistlikud ning postfundamentalistlikud perspektiivid, mis rõhutavad poliitilise ja ühiskondliku elu määravate ja transsendentaalsete kategooriate puudumist (Norval 2003; Thomassen 2013). Mõlemat suunda ühendab eetos, mis pooldab praeguse neoliberaalse korra tugevat muutmist poliitilise subjektistamise protsesside kaudu. Kuid see eetos on olnud tõrjuv esindusinstituutide rolli tunnustamise osas, mille tähtsust kiputakse nendes liberaalset teooriat ja liberaalset demokraatiat kritiseerivates käsitlustes pisendada. Ma väidan, et selline analüüs on hädavajalik alternatiivsete demokraatiavormide kujutamiseks, mis ühelt poolt inkorporeeriks (neo)liberalismi kriitikat, kuid oleks teisalt vastuvõtlik ka kriitika suhtes, et radikaalne demokraatia ei ole piisavalt normatiivne.

Käesolevas doktoritöös käsitlen radikaalse demokraatia teooria seisukohti esindusinstituutide kohta, kasutades selleks demokraatia ja esindusinstituutide vahelise suhte konstrueerimist Läti juhtumiuuringu kontekstis. Doktoritöö uurib Läti rahvusliku identiteedi konstrueerimist pikaajaliselt, alates 19. sajandi rahvuslikust liikumisest kuni tänapäevaste aruteludeni COVID-19 piirangute üle, mis tugineb originaalsele diskursusanalüüsile, hõlmates ajavahemikku

1988–2021, ning sekundaarsetele allikatele. Diskursusanalüüs näitab, et kuigi esindusvalitsemise süsteemi on seostatud „euroopalikkusega“, mida vaadeldakse positiivselt, ja „demokraatiaga“, mida on samastatud peamiselt „rahva“ vahendamata tegevusega, on tegelikud poliitilised institutsioonid ja eelkõige erakonnad samastatud ahnuse, korrupsiooni ja omakasupüüdlikkusega. Esindusinstituutioonide eitamine ja esindatuse tagasilükkamine Lätis, kuid samas „rahva“ demokraatliku suveräänsuse omaksvõtmine otsedemokraatiale viidates tõstatab teoreetilise küsimuse normatiivse raamistiku kohta, mille läbi esindusinstituutioonide radikaalse demokraatia perspektiivides tõlgendatakse. Läti juhtumianalüüs illustreerib ilmekalt asjaolu, et esindusinstituutioonide roll on midagi enam kui pelk samastamine liberalismiga. Selle argumendi esiletõstmine aitab korrigeerida üht radikaalse demokraatia teoorias esinevat eelarvamust: kuigi radikaalne demokraatia hõlmab ka esindusinstituutioonide tunnustavaid mõttekäike, pälvivad need siiski vähem tähelepanu kui liberalismi vastu suunatud esindusvalitsemise kriitika.

Eelnevale lisaks avab doktoritöö uusi mõttesuundi demokraatlikust siirdest ja demokraatiast postkommunismi kontekstis. Levinuimad akadeemilised käsitlused positsioneerivad demokraatlikku rahulolematust Ida-Euroopas kui selgelt eristuvat kultuurilist ja ajaloolist nähtust, need analüüsid eeldavad ka hierarhilist suhet Lääne demokraatiatega. Radikaalse demokraatia käsitlused eitavad vaatenurka, mille kohaselt demokraatia seisneb ühe õige mudeli õiges rakendamises institutsionaalse raamistiku või kultuuriliste väärtuste kaudu. See eelarvamus on demokratiseerumise kirjanduses sage. Demokraatlikku poliitikat Ida-Euroopas võib tõepoolest seostada kultuuri ja keelega, kuid mõistmaks nende rolli mitteesentsialistlikus võtmes, tuleb neid vaadelda kui identiteedi enesemääratlusi, kus erinevad struktuuralsed diskursuseelemendid on pidevas muutuses ja mitte monoliitsed plokid, mis on poliitilised identiteedid ette määratlenud.

Doktoritöö teises peatükis analüüsin põhilisi paradigmasid Ida-Euroopa regiooni demokraatiauuringutes, seades kahtluse alla neis esitatud poliitilise võõrandumise ja usaldamatuse põhjendused. Ida-Euroopa ja Balti riikide siirde- ja demokratiseerimisuuringutes on demokraatlike protsesside analüüsid pendeldanud institutsionaalsete ja kultuuriliste seletuste vahel. Kuigi siirded olid näiliselt kiired ja edukad, jäid sotsioloogilise mõõtmega seotud tegurid nagu madalam poliitiline osalus ja poliitiline usaldus tagaplaanile. Probleemide (taas)ilmnemise järgsed uurimused on Ida- ja Lääne-Euroopa erisusi selgitanud peamiselt kultuuri kaudu. Kriitilise postkolonialismi suunda esindavad uurijad väidavad, et Lääne teadlaste käsitlused Ida-Euroopast kipuvad olema eurotsentrilised ning nendes lähenemistes peituvad pikaajalised identiteedihierarhiad seletavadki osaliselt regiooni demokraatia-teemaliste uurimuste kultuurilist determinismi. Taoline akadeemiline perspektiiv Ida-Euroopast, kombineerituna demokraatliku teoretiseerimise üheülbalisusega, süvendab võimetust mõtestada nende riikide kultuurilist ja ajaloolist konteksti produktiivsemalt ja vähem teleoloogiliselt.

Kolmas peatükk on pühendatud kesksele teoreetilisele küsimusele, kuidas kontseptualiseerida esindusinstituutioonide radikaalses demokraatias. Peatüki

alguses teen kokkuvõtte esindusdemokraatia kriisi teemalisest debatist, puudutades ka seda, milliste kriteeriumite alusel on püütud hinnata kriisi tõsidust. Seejärel kirjeldan „pööret esindusdemokraatia poole“ demokraatia teoorias, mis rõhutab, et esindatus on olemuslik osa demokraatiast ning oponentidele, mille kohaselt on esindatuse ja demokraatia vahel sisemine vastuolu. Kuid ka esindatuse teoreetikud seisavad silmitsi oluliste küsimustega „rahva“ ja poliitiliste liidrite omavahelise suhte teemal, kes mobiliseeruvad ja konstrueerivad kollektiivseid identiteete. Selline kriitika on suunatud eeskätt radikaalsetele demokraatidele ja post-fundamentalistidele, kes eitavad universalistlike normide olemasolu.

Adresseerides normatiivsuse teemat post-fundamentalistikus mõtteviisis – mis on kolmanda peatüki põhifookuses –, analüüsin üht tuntuimat radikaalse demokraatia raamistikku kollektiivse identiteedi konstrueerimisel: Ernesto Laclau ja Chantal Mouffe'i hegemoonia, antagonismi ja poliitilise identiteedi konstrueerimise teooriat (Laclau ja Mouffe 1985), lisaks ka Laclau töid populismi kui demokraatliku poliitilise strateegia teemal (Laclau 2005). Laclau ja Mouffe'i teoreetiline raamistik on pärvinud üksjagu kriitikat oma „detsisionismi“ ja selge normatiivse mõõtme puudumise tõttu (Urbinati 2019, Rummens 2009). Laclau töödes on demokraatlik subjekt positsioneeritud viisil, mis seab kahtluse alla olemasoleva liberaalse hegemoonilise korra ja selle osaks oleva esindussüsteemi. Laclau nägemus institutsioonidest tugineb osaliselt ka nähtusel, mida Chantal Mouffe defineerib „demokraatliku paradoksina“ (Mouffe 2009). Selle kohaselt iseloomustab demokraatiat pinge rahva suveräänsuse ja indiviidi õiguste vahel ning kus institutsioonidki esindavad üht või teist vaadet võitluses hegemoonilise positsiooni üle. Vastandina sellele seisukohale väidan, et radikaalse demokraatia post-fundamentalistik eetika peaks pöörama rohkem tähelepanu Claude Leforti võimu kontseptsioonile ning rollile, mille ta omistab esindusinstitutsioonidele. Leforti post-fundamentalistikus lähenemises demokraatiale on esindusinstitutsioonid demokraatia olemuslikuks osaks, kuid liberaaldemokraatia ei võrdu esindusinstitutsioonidega. Leforti lähenemist on kirjeldatud ka kui võimu „kolmandat keskust“ (Flynn 2019) poliitilises režiimis. Üks Leforti võtmeleide on, et seda võimu keskust demokraatias sümboliseerivad – kuid ei oma – just nimelt esindusinstitutsioonid. „Kolmas keskus“, mida ei saa samastada ei „valitsejate“ ega „valitsetavatega“, pakub uut moodi raamistikku post-fundamentalistikule demokraatia teooriale; raamistikku, mis on kontrastiks Laclau ja Mouffe'i käsitlusele hegemoonilisest võitluses võimu keskuse üle.

Neljandas peatükis käsitlen Läti juhtumiuuringut Laclau ja Leforti teoreetilise arutelu võtmes. Laclau jaoks on „rahvas“ võtmetähtsusega diskursiivne tähistaja, mille abil on võimalik ebavõrdses poliitilises kontekstis tekitada antagonismi ja luua uusi poliitilisi liite ning saavutada märkimisväärsed poliitilisi muutusi. „Rahva“ domineerimine Läti diskursustes sobitaks sellesse vaatesse, kuid viited „ühitsusele“ ja Läti rahvuskogukonna defineerimiseks kasutatavad etnokultuurilised markerid vastavad enam Laclau käsitlusele etnopoluismist. Läti demokraatidiskursustes ei viita „teine“ aga mitte etnilistele vähemustele, vaid poliitilistele esindajatele, kellel on samaväärne õigus kehastada etnilise Läti kogukonna

suveräänsust. Seega, kuigi konstitutiivne raja paikneb väljaspool kogukonda, toimib see ka esinduspoliitikat välistavalt ja antagoniseerivalt nii parlamendi, poliitiliste parteide kui poliitikute kehas. Laclau perspektiiv on ebapiisav, tõlgendamaks dominantseid hoiakuid Läti esindusinstituutide suhtes, kui see just ei omista spetsiifilist normatiivset rolli instituutide endi diskursiivsele konstrueerimisele. Käesolevas doktoritöös väidan, et Läti juhtum kinnitab esindusinstituutide kui demokraatia olemusliku pärisosa rolli, vastavalt lefortilikule perspektiivile. Doktoritöö seega kinnitab, aga ka laiendab lefortilikku vaadet, et esindusinstituutid moodustavad struktuuritasandi – ruumi, milles „rahvas“ oma erinevates kehasutes saab koos eksisteerida, tekitades produktiivse pinget universalistlike ja partikulaarsete kujutuste vahel. See käsitlus vastandub universalismi ja partikularismi suhtele Laclau ja Mouffe'i hegemooniateoorias.

Neljanda peatüki viimane sektsioon tutvustab doktoritöös kasutatavat empiirilise analüüsi meetodit, poststrukturealistlikku diskursuanalüüsi. Selle doktoritöö põhiliseks empiiriliseks ülesandeks on kaardistada dominantsed diskursused nähtuste kohta nagu „rahvas“, „demokraatia“, „riik“, ja „poliitika“, ning muude kontseptsioonide osas, mis seostuvad esindusinstituutidega. Esimese ajaloolise perioodi analüüs tugineb sekundaarsetele allikatele ning käsitleb rahvusloome aega 19. sajandi keskpaigast vabariigi kehtestamiseni 1918. aastal kuni autoritaarse riigipöördeni 1930. aastate keskel. Teine ajalooline periood, mille analüüs põhineb peamiselt algallikate analüüsile, pühendub riigi- ja rahvuse ehitamisele nõukogude ajal: Läti iseseisvusliikumise vahetult iseseisvuse väljakuulutamiseni järgnenud perioodile. Ajavahemiku 2000–2021 analüüs keskendub võimu käsitlemisele Läti otsedemokraatia instrumentide – referendumite ning paber- ja veebiallkirjade kogumise – kasutamise teemalistes debattides. Sellest ajavahemikust valisin diskursusanalüüsiks välja seitse konkreetsemat arutelu. Andmekogumine hõlmas vastava perioodi poliitilisi ja avalikke seisukohavõtte päevalehtedes ja uudisteportaalides, mis olid saadaoleva statistika kohaselt suurima leviku või lugemusega või mida külastati veebis kõige rohkem.

Diskursusanalüüs, mis on viienda peatüki sisuks, näitab kuidas „rahvas“ on järjepidevalt konstrueeritud kui ettemääratud, orgaaniliselt ühtne üksus kuidas see on põrkunud demokraatia ideega, mida on kujutatud nii Lääne tunnustuse märgina kui ka millegi „võõrana“, „rahva“ „ühtsust“ ohustavana. Kuuendas peatükis näitan, kuidas pärast Nõukogude Liidu lagunemist ja iseseisvuse taastamist on see võistluslik suhe toonud kaasa produktiivse, toimiva suhte otsimise valitsevate arusaamade vahel rahva ühtsusest ja demokraatlikust pluralismist. Kuigi ühelt poolt on demokraatiat traditsioonilise esindussüsteemi mõttes kujutatud „euroopaliku“ ja „läänelikuna“, on seda teisalt tugevalt seostatud ka kodanike otsosalusega näiteks referendumite või allkirjade kogumise kaudu, mida käsitletakse „rahva“ ühise tahte väljendusena. Minu analüüs näitab seoste puudumist poliitiliste toimijate ja demokraatia diskursuse vahel, rõhutades veel kord asjaolu, et kuigi poliitilised parteid väljendavad poliitilisi subjektusi, ei pretendeeri parteid nende kehtastamisele. Seega on „rahva“ orgaanilise ühtsuse saavutamine

rahva poliitilise otseosaluse kaudu radikaalsete perspektiivide kohaselt võimatu ülesanne.

Läti juhtum kinnitab „representatiivse pöörde“ kirjanduses toodud argumente, mis väljendavad skeptilisust otsedemokraatia võime üle toimida esindusdemokraatia puuduste leevendajana. See juhtum on vastuolus ka kõige radikaalsemate demokraatia käsitlustega, mis pooldavad „tänavatel“ mobiliseerumist ning kodanike otsest tegutsemist väljaspool institutsioone. Kuna esindusinstitutsioone seostatakse enamasti liberaalse demokraatiaga, on need olnud enamike radikaalse demokraatia käsitluste kriitika sihtmärgiks. Läti juhtum näitab aga, et „rahvas“ ei saa olla täielikult emantsipatiivne kategooria, kui see ei ole seostatud esindusinstitutsioonidega. Institutsioonide rolliks ei ole kompromisside tegemine liberaalse süsteemiga, nagu argumenteerivad „demokraatia paradoksi“ teoreetikud nagu Mouffe. Leforti raamistik aitab meil paremini selgitada pinget, mis eksisteerib Lätis erinevate võimu enesemääratluste vahel ja nende omavaheliste vastuolude tagajärjel. Esindusinstitutsioonid, lefortilikus käsitluses, kannavad spetsiifilist, kuid „tühja“ rolli – nad vaid loovad kollektiivse tegevuse horisondi, kuid selle sisu sõltub konkreetsest ajaloolisest kontekstist. Siiski on institutsioonide sümbolne roll mingi koha demokraatlikkuse näitajana asendamatu.

Tulevastes uurimustöödes on oluline lähtuda sellest, et esindusinstitutsioone ei saa taandada vaid struktuuridele, mida ajalooliselt seostatakse demokraatiaga, nagu näiteks parteipõhised valimised ja parteipoliitika, olemasolevad parlamentaarsed süsteemid ning hierarhiline jaotus avaliku halduse institutsioonide ja valitsuse vahel. Esindusinstitutsioonid on midagi enam kui need traditsioonilised vormid, nende eesmärgiks on järjepidevalt nihestada eeldusi „rahva“ otsestest ja ühesest kohalolust, säilitades horisondil siiski sellise ühtsuse saavutamise võimalust. Vaatamata pidevale kurtmisele demokraatia allakäigu teemadel, võivad selle uuemad ja loodetavasti paremad variandid veel hoopis ees olla.

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Keelteoskus

Lāti – emakeel, inglise, vene, eesti

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