

ARTICLE

The ‘European sovereignty’ narrative: More EU capacity, but less democracy? Citizens’ perceptions in France and Belgium

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Abstract

As part of the growing academic interest in the reception of European narratives, our research explores the ‘European sovereignty narrative’ (ESN). We focus on two countries that represent different ways to relate to sovereignty: France, the archetypal ‘strong state’ advocating national sovereignty; and Belgium, a ‘weak state’ accustomed to pooling sovereignty. Based on a survey of a representative sample of the population, we ask: How is the ESN perceived by citizens in France and Belgium? We study, first, to what extent and how the ESN is perceived by citizens in France and Belgium. We focus, next, on its interpretation around two main meanings ascribed to sovereignty: *political sovereignty*, as the capacity to act, and *popular sovereignty*, as democratic accountability. Our results show that the knowledge, meanings, and priorities attributed to the ESN are comparable in both countries, albeit with nuances. French respondents are more familiar with the notion of (European) sovereignty than Belgian respondents due to its presence in national political culture and its extensive use by French politicians. However, they may find it less compatible with national sovereignty. Regarding the meaning of the ESN, ‘European sovereignty’ is more associated with the EU’s political capacity to act (political sovereignty) than with debates about democratic accountability and the capacity of citizens to express their preferences (popular sovereignty). We conclude that, while the ESN may find transnational common ground, its reception and interpretation are still filtered by national differences and disconnected from the democratic legitimisation of the EU.

Keywords: European Sovereignty, European Union, Political Narrative, France, Belgium

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Introduction: The Perception of ‘European sovereignty’ Across National Boundaries

The “narrative turn” (Bouza García, 2017) of the legitimisation of the European Union (EU) in the last two decades refers to the multiplication of competing stories revolving around more or less sustainable topics. In this ‘Justification Jungle’ (de Wilde, 2023), the European sovereignty narrative (ESN) has emerged as a particularly salient one, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the beginning of the second Trump administration in January 2025. The ESN appears both as an advocacy of the added value of the EU to cope with geopolitical challenges (Bora & Schramm, 2023) or incremental transformations such as the digital transition (Falkner et al., 2024), as well as a political answer to attacks by populist parties against European integration in terms of *national* sovereignty (Bouza García & Oleart, 2022). European sovereignty is understood in this article in two main ways: as the reinforcement of the capacity and autonomy to act of the EU (*political sovereignty*), both in internal and external affairs; and as democratic accountability regarding the capacity of citizens to voice their preferences, be it through representation, direct democracy or other ways of expression (*popular sovereignty*).

The guiding research question of the article is: How is the ESN perceived by citizens in France and Belgium? We answer this question through an online survey of French and Belgian populations aged 18 and above (in French and Dutch in the latter case) between 28 November 2023 and 1 December 2023. The purpose of the survey is to measure the reception of the ESN in terms of knowledge (understood as the extent to which respondents have heard of it), and the meanings and policy priorities attached to it by citizens. We argue, first, that the perception of the ESN is perceived along similar logics in France and Belgium, but that its interpretation is still shaped by national singularities. Second, the ESN has progressively been resignified to mean primarily *political sovereignty* rather than *popular sovereignty*. This makes the ESN congruent with mainstream EU legitimisation logics by emphasising the outputs regarding its capacity to deliver public goods, even if it does little to meet expectations in terms of democratic participation and accountability.

Theoretically, the article draws on the debate surrounding the role of narratives in EU legitimisation (Foret, 2025; Manners & Murray, 2016; Nicolaïdis & Pelabay, 2008; Trenz, 2016). It focuses on the understudied question of how European narratives are received by citizens (Beaudonnet et al., 2023; Eder, 2012; Kaiser, 2017). Our research discusses the respective roles of political sovereignty as a functionalist justification of the EU’s capacity (Schmidt, 2006), and popular sovereignty as a foundational European narrative emphasising the importance of democratic accountability (De Vries, 2023).

Empirically, our analysis draws on the literature showing the influence of national framing when making sense of European integration (De Vreese, 2003; Diez Medrano, 2010), and of the historical processes of state- and nation-building (Bartolini, 2005; Kelemen & McNamara, 2022; Kassim & Schout, 2024) on the perception of European narratives. We focus on France and Belgium as two countries that represent different ways to relate to sovereignty as they represent ideal types of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ states (Badie & Birnbaum, 1982; Dyson, 2009). France stands for a model of a strong state due to an important level of centralisation and concentration of power, and a merging of popular and national sovereignty under the aegis of the “Republic” as the symbolic expression of collective identity. These characteristics may hamper its relation to Europe, as the reliance on sovereignty as a legitimising mantra and the claim to punch above its weight in international affairs may not facilitate compromises in Brussels. By contrast, Belgium is an example of a weak state, organised as a federation and a consociation to manage internal cleavages (be it linguistic, territorial, cultural, religious, or economic) without seeking to create full congruence between culture and politics. Externally, Belgium has historically opted for the pooling of sovereignty in multilateral organisations, in compliance with the requirements of European integration. Beyond their differences, France and Belgium are both founding member states of the EU and, in different capacities, two usual advocates for advancing further integration. Still, their citizens nowadays are among the most critical of the EU. As such, the two countries are good case studies of the reception of the ESN in two different national contexts. This ideational focus follows the logic that the development of the EU as a polity is not uniquely based on the concrete economic and trade interests of countries, but also on the normative ideas about what constitutes a legitimate polity (see Jachtenfuchs et al., 1998).

The article is organised as follows. First, the article maps the role, effects, and limits of political narratives in the legitimisation of the EU and locates European sovereignty as a prominent narrative in recent years. Second, we frame the structures of opportunity and constraints for the ESN in France and Belgium according to their history of state-building, community-making, and relation to the EU. Third, we describe the methodology and the survey upon which the article is based. Fourth, we present the empirical findings of the survey in comparative perspectives according to the level of knowledge of the ESN and its interpretations by citizens in each country. National differences are discussed in relation to other variables such as ideological attitudes and political positioning on a left/right axis in the reception of the ESN. Last, the discussion and conclusion present the implications of the findings regarding the possible contribution of the ESN to the legitimisation of the EU, and put forward possible avenues for future research.

The “European Sovereignty” Narrative as a New Mantra of EU Legitimation?

A booming scholarship has taken stock of the profusion of European political narratives in the last two decades and studied their nature, meanings, and purposes (Foret, 2025; Nicolaïdis and Pelabay, 2008; Oleart & Van Weyenberg, 2019; Trenz, 2016). Researchers acknowledge that the competition and combination of European narratives have led to a ‘Narrative Ju-jitsu’ (McMahon & Kaiser, 2022), and that their reception remains understudied to better understand the influence of national, socio-economic and ideological factors (Beaudonnet et al., 2023). The perception of the ESN is likely to be impacted by such factors due to the shaping of the notion of sovereignty by nation- and state-building traditions.

The European Sovereignty Narrative: Rallying Around the Flag and/or Bone of Contention

For a long time, the topic of sovereignty has been, at best, implicit and transversal in mainstream EU narratives, forming part of an advocacy for rights and democracy, as well as shaping ‘Europe’ as a ‘global player’ (Manners & Murray, 2016). In the public sphere, analyses of the written press in several member states between 1990 and 2002 showed that the EU was mainly represented as an economic institution limiting the states’ autonomy but without replacing them with a new form of sovereignty at supranational level (Diez Medrano & Gray, 2010). Similar research between 2012 and 2019 found that the topic of sovereignty was almost invisible (de Wilde, 2023). Still, a few years later, “European sovereignty” has become a leitmotiv of EU legitimisation. Successive crises such as Brexit (2016) and the first Trump administration (2016–2020), the Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020, the Russian invasion of Ukraine initiated in 2022, and the estrangement from the United States under the second Trump administration (2025) contributed to bringing the notion back to the fore. Beyond these effects of context, the influence of cues given by elites on citizens’ perceptions should not be neglected: The more national or supranational leaders refer to the narrative, the more it is likely to resonate among citizens (Meijers et al., 2025). Crucially, the advocacy for European sovereignty by Emmanuel Macron from his speech at the Sorbonne in 2017 onwards (Bora, 2023; Roch & Oleart, 2024), and the self-definition of the first Von der Leyen college (2019–2024) as a ‘Geopolitical Commission’ (Haroche, 2022), asserted the topic on the agenda.

Four main interpretations of sovereignty can be identified in political and intellectual debates: national sovereignty, which refers to the autonomy of the Westphalian nation-state to govern over territory demarcated by borders; the supranational sovereignty exercised by the EU in certain areas of public action; parliamentary sovereignty, referring to the autonomy of parliaments at all territorial levels in the decision-making process and control of the executive; popular sovereignty, by

which citizens confer legitimacy to decision-makers in a democratic system (Brack et al., 2019). Some scholars interpret sovereignty along the three usual dimensions of conflict in European politics: between integration and demarcation; between increasing or decreasing public spending; between more or less discretionary power of the executive (De Wilde, 2023; Kriesi et al., 2008). Against this theoretical background, our study of the ESN in this article synthesises sovereignty in two dimensions: *political sovereignty*, both in terms of capacity to act, autonomy towards member states and actorness towards the rest of the world; and *popular sovereignty*, as the capacity of citizens to voice their preferences, be it through representation, direct democracy and/or other ways of expression.

Moreover, a latent dimension underlying the debate about the ESN is discussed: sovereignty as identity. Political sovereignty, as the autonomous capacity to act, requires citizens' loyalty to extend beyond support based solely on interests and coercion. Popular sovereignty, whereby a political community exercises its right to self-determination in order to define a shared future, is also closely linked to the formation of a sense of belonging. Therefore, identity is a cross-cutting dimension that informs both understandings of sovereignty. We do not intend here to revisit the longstanding debate on the existence (or lack thereof) of a European demos or demoi (Nicolaidis, 2013; Oleart, 2025) and the feasibility of a democratic European polity without a 'thick' collective identity (Delanty, 1995; 2019), a topic that has been significantly rekindled by recent crises that have called into question the strength of EU solidarity and the management of its borders (Demirci et al., 2025). We simply acknowledge the path dependence of the perception of sovereignty on *national* identity, according to the self-assertion of the national state as more or less unitary and/or autonomous. We consider the effect that this path dependence may have on how the notion of sovereignty is perceived at the European level in relation to a potential *European* identity. Hence, we take into account identity both as (a) an antecedent factor that shapes how any narrative in terms of sovereignty is produced and received; and (b) a possible outcome, given that support for the joint exercise of sovereignty may reinforce a sense of community. While the interactions between identity and sovereignty are evidenced empirically and theoretically at the national level, they can only be explored prospectively at the European level due to the recent and tentative nature of the narrative and enforcement of 'European sovereignty'.²

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The State and the Nation as Resilient Matrix of European Narratives, Especially on Sovereignty

A rich literature in historical sociology of the nation-state- and EU-making (Bartolini, 2005; Kelemen & McNamara, 2022) emphasises the interactions between the two processes. National elites, be it public intellectuals (Lacroix & Nicolaidis, 2010) or government officials (Kassim & Schout, 2025) operating primarily within national arenas, are central to the narrative recomposition to justify European integration. Therefore, EU official rhetoric, elites and policy processes have a limited influence, and EU-making is heavily filtered through the lens of national politics and culture (Schmidt, 2006).

The key role of national prisms in the reception of the ESN is confirmed by a rare survey researching citizens' views of the topic in eight member states (France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden) (Foundations Jean Jaurès and Friedrich-Ebert, 2021). Indeed, 6 out of 10 respondents to this survey said they understood what 'European sovereignty' is. However, they diverged regarding its meaning. One in two considered the expression 'European sovereignty' to be positive (52%), compared to 26% negative and 22% neither positive nor negative. Only 51% considered the EU to be sovereign today. According to this research, the biggest obstacle to greater European sovereignty was not the reluctance of the people but, in decreasing order, nationalist leaders ruling some member states, pressure from foreign countries, the weakness of European institutions as they exist today, and cultural differences between European nations. This highlights both (1) the resistance of national politicians and cultures and (2) the lack of political capacity of the EU as challenges for the ESN (Foundations Jean Jaurès and Friedrich-Ebert, 2021).

Perceptions of (European) Sovereignty in Belgium and France

Against this background, we selected two countries with different histories of state-making leading to distinct attitudes towards sovereignty. France is the protagonist of the advocacy of European sovereignty and has constantly framed the EU as an amplifier of its national sovereignty ('La France en grand') while opposing supra-national interference in prerogatives of member states. By contrast, Belgium has pragmatically opted to pool its sovereignty through European integration to ensure its security and prosperity. As such, the two countries are different cases for the study of the reception of the ESN by citizens, as they have different ways to relate to sovereignty. They represent ideal types of 'strong' (France) and 'weak' (Belgium) states (Badie & Birnbaum, 1982; Atkinson & Coleman, 1989). Their historical differences in nation-state-making processes are reflected in the way citizens in the two countries consider the elements that most create a sense of community among the

citizens of the EU. According to the Spring 2023 Eurobarometer, the French highlight history, culture, and geography, while the Belgians prioritise the economy, solidarity, and concern for the environment (European Commission, 2023a.1, 28–29). While they have differences, France and Belgium also have common points: They are two founding member states and supporters of further European integration, even if Belgian and French citizens are nevertheless among the most critical of Europe (European Commission, 2023b). All these elements turn them into relevant cases to study the reception of the ESN.

Belgium: How a Small Consociation Comes to Terms with Sovereignty

Both Belgium and the EU are polities characterised by consociational features, which have often led to Belgium as a model for the EU and Belgians as “model Europeans” (Foret & Antunes, 2011). ‘Consociationalism’ refers to a political model organising the coexistence of communities without searching for homogenisation. This model was originally applied to small and strongly divided countries like Belgium with linguistically, culturally, religiously, and/or territorially diverse populations (Lijphart, 1969), and later to the EU (Taylor, 1994). In such systems, decision-making is based on constant negotiations and compromises between elites, dispensing citizens from getting engaged directly and actively in politics (Lijphart, 1977). However, the risk – illustrated by the Belgian case (Andeweg, 2019) – is that these moderating effects of consociationalism may diminish with time and become counter-productive by reifying the differences between communities (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020).

The postulate of congruent interests and structures between Belgium and Europe, and of unwavering support by Belgians of European integration, requires some nuances (Foret & Antunes, 2011). In the wake of Belgian ‘founding fathers’ of the EU, like Paul-Henri Spaak, Belgian politicians have remained advocates of European integration (Frank et al., 2003). Internally, the European background both increases (why bother with Belgium when the EU can do the job?) and constrains (Flanders refusing the loss of Brussels as European capital and economic hub) tensions between regions and communities (Bursens, 2002). However, the latent crisis of Belgian politics hardens negotiations on the distribution of costs and benefits of EU membership. Belgium’s traditional status as the “heart of Europe” – both as the country hosting key EU institutions and being Euro-enthusiast – has become more fragile and controversial (Drieskens, 2019). A revival of Flemish nationalism and policy challenges such as migration, economic decline and climate change may unbalance the fragile governance of Belgian governance (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020).

Against this background, what does sovereignty mean in Belgium, and how does the ESN fit in it? The country is unfortunately not included in the comparative

survey pursued in eight member states on the perception of ‘European sovereignty’ (Foundations Jean Jaurès and Friedrich-Ebert, 2021), and no comparable data from other sources exist to our knowledge. Nonetheless, in a consociation that relies on consensus, politics must be temperate and rational enough to be negotiable (hence the limitation of claims for national sovereignty), and negotiations are driven by elites who are empowered to make deals that are ratified *ex post* by their electorates (hence the limitation of popular sovereignty). Since the origins of European integration, Belgium has encouraged supranationalism and the extension of qualified majority voting (Frank et al., 2003). In summary, the Belgian loose conception of national sovereignty does not compete with a narrative of European sovereignty. However, the Belgian consociational national prism perhaps does not provide a foundation for citizens to acknowledge and interpret the notion of sovereignty itself in the same way as France.

France: Is the ‘Grande Nation’ Ready to Shift From National to European Sovereignty?

In contrast to Belgium, France is the archetypal example of a ‘strong’ state that has supported European integration as a way to reinforce its national sovereignty and influence. However, in an enlarging and increasingly market-oriented EU, the French leadership and administrative model have lost ground and revived tensions between national and European sovereignty. The description of France as a society historically organised by, for and around the State (Birnbäum, 1982) still holds, albeit with some nuances. It refers to a tradition of centralisation and concentration of power, limitation of intermediary bodies, primacy of the State in the definition of a transcendent general interest and longing for a congruence between culture and politics (Vauchez & France, 2021) and tending to subordinate popular sovereignty to national sovereignty. The symbolic resilience of this “logic of the state” has not prevented the French State from sharing its attributes of sovereignty with local authorities, interest groups (Rosanvallon, 1990) and market forces (Borraz & Guiraudon, 2008). A muscular vision of political sovereignty has traditionally been invested with economic significance (Mistral, 2023) and the performance of Macron as both a “Jupiterian president”, “commander in chief” of a ‘start-up nation’ and leader of a unified Europe is the last version to date of the dramatisation of national sovereignty (Mistral, 2024).

France has consistently tried to promote ‘French dirigisme’ as a counterbalance to German ordoliberalism (Warlouzet, 2019). However, since the development of the Single Market in the eighties, the French State has increasingly left the regulation of the economy to “Brussels”, and refocused on its core prerogatives (Raimbault, 2006). The concentration of power and expertise at the level of the executive remains an asset in intergovernmental mechanisms, but the conversion of the EU to ‘good practices’ coming from other models of governance – such as transparency, delegation to

agencies or participatory devices – is less familiar to French political culture (Rozenberg, 2024). The pragmatic adaptation of French institutions to Europeanisation has not been fully acknowledged in political and symbolic terms, where the national prism continues to dominate (Balme & Woll, 2005). The temptation to view the EU as ‘La France en grand’ remains strong, as evidenced by the idea of advancing European state pooling of national sovereignties under French leadership (Kahn, 2026). A contemporary illustration is the Europeanisation of French nuclear deterrence – as the only EU member state with nuclear power, such a defence logic would situate EU defence at the discretion of the French president (Kayali & Caulcutt, 2026).

This resilient myth of a sovereign France as a leading force in a united Europe (Bora & Lequesne, 2023) suggests that the “sovereignist” claim rejecting European integration has never emerged as a sustainable political cleavage (Spector, 2021). In the French campaigns against the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) or the European constitution (2005), the main trigger for electoral mobilisation was not the defence of national sovereignty but the opposition to a ‘neo-liberal Europe’ (Bora & Lequesne, 2023, p. 934; Crespy, 2008; Dufour, 2010). Dissident Eurosceptic voices were later reintegrated successively by the right and by the left, and even the main ‘anti-system’ party, the National Rally (previously named ‘National Front’), has shifted from the threat of a “Frexit” to an accommodation within a reformed EU (Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024). The ambivalences of the apparent Euro-consensus among political elites are also visible in French public opinion: There is still widespread support for the European project, but there is dissatisfaction with its assimilation to economic liberalism and its failure to regulate globalisation (Schmidt, 2007).

Another point to consider is that, unlike in Belgium, the topic of sovereignty remains ideologically charged in French political culture. Those who identify themselves as voting for the left tend to equate sovereignty with nationalism and view it more negatively, while those who vote for the right relate it to independence and view it more positively (Finchelstein, 2024). However, when the debate shifts from national to European sovereignty, the perception becomes more positive and less related to the left/right cleavage, as if “the concept of sovereignty is then absorbed by its European addition” (Finchelstein, 2024). The main opposition lies between pro-Europeans, who support greater European sovereignty (e.g., in decreasing order, voters for Renaissance, Socialists, Ecologists, Les Républicains and even La France Insoumise) and far-right anti-Europeans (e.g. voters for Rassemblement National and Reconquête) (Finchelstein, 2024). This background suggests that the cues given by political elites in their use of sovereignty rhetoric may vary according to context and level of governance at stake. Emmanuel Macron’s advocacy for the notion of ‘European sovereignty’ since his first speech at the Sorbonne in 2017 has largely been received as a means of defending France’s economic policy in relation to the reform of EU competition law (Bora, 2023; Monar, 2025). This has led to the polarisation of

the political debate, with both sides of the party spectrum accusing the president of prioritising his personal ideological agenda rather than national preferences and interests (Thevenin, 2025). Consequently, the narrative on European sovereignty hammered by the French executive did not fully succeed in reconciling national and supranational loyalties beyond ideological differences. According to a survey comparing eight member states (Foundations Jean Jaurès and Friedrich-Ebert, 2021), respondents in France are among those who see the notion of European sovereignty as less modern, less understandable, less positive, less achieved, and less compatible with national sovereignty.

Methodology and Data: A Survey Approach to Trace the Reception of 'European Sovereignty' in France and Belgium

Our article is empirically based on a survey that aims at capturing the reception of the ESN in France and Belgium. The survey was administered online by the Institute Billendi on a representative panel (1,000 people in each country) of French and Belgian populations. The fieldwork was conducted between 28 November 2023 and 1 December 2023. The target population included people aged 18 and above (no upper age limit) resident within private households in each country. The recruitment, aimed at achieving a good cross-section of each country's population, was conducted according to a 'multi-sourcing' methodology, which included: third-parties' databases, online and offline recruitment. To be able to take part in the survey, respondents had to complete a socio-demographic questionnaire first and approve a double opt-in, where they confirmed their willingness to participate. Each respondent received a unique pseudo-anonymised link to the website to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was in French for France, and in French and Dutch for Belgium.

After receiving the results, survey performance for each country was assessed by comparing the results for key demographic variables in relation to national-level population statistics. The method used was that of quotas (based on age, gender, region, and education level). For each country, the data was weighted to account for different probabilities of selection among respondents. The average response rate (ratio between contacted people and completed questionnaire) was 30%, and the maximum margin of error is 3.02%. The size of the sample in each country guarantees reliable descriptive statistics of opinions and attitudes of the national populations of France and Belgium. However, for methodological reasons, we refrain from presenting statistical data on infranational differences relating to territorial (e.g. Flanders vs. Wallonia or Brussels), linguistic, socio-economic or political variables, due to the limited number of respondents (especially in Belgium). We err on the side of caution by mentioning trends that may require further research to confirm.

Similarities and Differences in the Reception of the Narrative on “European Sovereignty” in France and Belgium

Knowledge of the ESN in France and Belgium

Our survey first evaluates the knowledge that respondents have of the notion of “European sovereignty”: 57.4% of French respondents said they have heard of it, compared to 34.8% saying this is not the case. The proportions are reversed for Belgians, who answer yes at 32.3% and no at 55.9%. This discrepancy is likely to reflect the unequal use of the concept in the speeches of national politicians. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron repeatedly referred to it, while Belgian Prime Ministers Alexander De Croo (2020–2025) and Bart De Wever (as of February 2025) hardly used the term. This is in tune with what the scholarship says regarding the importance of cues given by national political elites to frame communication about European affairs (Schmidt, 2006), as well as with the different anchorage of sovereignty in France and Belgium. Our empirical results provide an initial overview and exploratory interpretation of the low knowledge of the ESN, especially in Belgium, but more research work is needed to identify the causes of this situation.

Table 1. Comparison in France and Belgium of the Acquaintance With ‘European Sovereignty’

Have you ever heard of the notion of ‘European sovereignty’?	France	Belgium
Yes	57.4%	32.3%
No	34.8%	55.9%
Do not know/Prefer not to answer	7.8%	11.7%

Source: Survey, November–December 2023

In both countries, the number of people who have heard of the notion of “European sovereignty” increases with the age at which they finish their studies and the level of diploma – and is higher among those who have a job than among those who do not. A higher knowledge of the concept also goes hand in hand with higher interest in politics and higher trust in the national government and in the EU. In contrast, the partisan positioning of the respondents on the left-right axis does not reveal any notable trend. Finally, no significant link is visible with the fact that individuals declare to feel more national, more European, or both. The limited size of our sample does not allow us to go further in the interpretation of these observations, but they are congruent with what previous research says regarding the effects of socio-economic

and political variables (Foundations Jean Jaurès and Friedrich-Ebert, 2021) and the fact that the reference to 'European' sovereignty tends to neutralise the ideological charge of the concept (Finchelstein, 2024).

Meanings of 'European Sovereignty' in France and Belgium

Are the national differences observed in the knowledge of the ESN also visible in the meaning granted to the notion? And are ideological and identity variables (e.g. positioning on the left/right axis and feeling of national and/or identity belonging) more discriminating when questions shift from 'knowing' to 'evaluating' European sovereignty? The meanings of the ESN are formulated along three dimensions constructed for the survey according to the state of the art. The first dimension, *political sovereignty*, refers to the capacity of the EU (1) to defend its economic interests (1a) and the security of Europeans against external threats (1b). The second dimension, *popular sovereignty* (2), refers to the possibility for citizens to make themselves heard through the strengthening of the European Parliament in the European Union (2a) or the feeling that they have no say at European level (2b). A third transversal dimension measures the *relevance* of the notion of European sovereignty (3) in relation to a sense of *European identity* (3a) or the belief that sovereignty is linked solely to the nation state (3b). Respondents were asked to rank two answers out of six in order of priority. Table 2 shows the presence of the top two answers in both countries.

Overall, the hierarchy of the meanings granted to the notion of European sovereignty by French and Belgian respondents is similar, but with a few nuances. A first important observation is the rate of non-response to the question, which is double for Belgium (36.1%) compared to France (18.3%). This could be related to the lower initial knowledge of the notion of European sovereignty on the Belgian side. When you have never heard of the notion, you struggle to give any meaning to it. In both countries, the ESN is mostly understood as referring to *political sovereignty* in terms of capacity of the EU, then to a feeling of *European identity* and finally to *popular sovereignty* as the possibility (or not) for the citizens to be heard at European level.

Starting with *political sovereignty*, French respondents rank as the most important factors, first, the EU's capacity to defend its economic interests (40.2%) and, next, to defend the security of Europeans against external threats (33.5%). Belgian respondents invert this hierarchy as the defence against external threats (26.1%) comes before the defence of economic interests (23.6%). The protection against external threats may be prioritised in Belgium as a small country having historically experienced frequent invasions and seeking safety in numbers (De Neve, 2022), but, as a traditionally open economy, more reluctant to political interventionism, which could hinder fair competition and integration in global markets and multilateralism (Hockers et al., 2026). Meanwhile, the self-assertion of France as a nuclear and military power may diminish this feeling of vulnerability and subsequently this

deference to Europe (Calcara and Simón, 2025), but favours a vision of Europe as a structure of opportunity to extend public regulation of markets at a larger scale (Warlouzet, 2019).

Sovereignty as a *feeling of European identity* comes next in terms of importance, a bit more important for the French (23.9%) than Belgian (20.7%) respondents. The same proportion of respondents in both countries declare that European sovereignty means nothing, as sovereignty is linked solely to the nation state (9% of the Belgian sample against 9.4% of the French one). These minor differences between the two countries are not very significant as they are within the margin of error. This suggests that, when understood as identity, sovereignty is a secondary but consensual dimension. This interpretation of the ESN could therefore navigate national boundaries more easily than one based on political capacity. Finally, Belgian and French respondents converge to consider *popular sovereignty* as the less important notion of the ESN. The possibility for citizens to make themselves heard is referred to in similar proportions in the two countries, both in positive and negative terms: regarding the percentage of people considering that the strengthening of the European Parliament in the European Union is important (France: 15.9%; Belgium: 11.6%); and that citizens have no say at the European level (France: 12.8%; Belgium: 8.7%). The main takeaway is that the ESN is perceived as disconnected from the challenge of the democratisation of the EU.

Table 2. Comparison in France and Belgium of the Meaning Attributed to ‘European Sovereignty’ Through the Presence in the Top Two Answers

What does the concept of “European sovereignty” mean to you? (Two possible answers, in order of importance). NB: The data shown here is the presence in the top two answers, as well as the non-response rate. Hence, the total number of answers does not necessarily match 100%.	France	Belgium
The European Union's ability to defend its economic interests	40.2%	23.6%
The European Union's ability to defend the security of Europeans against external threats	33.5%	26.1%
A sense of European identity	23.9%	20.7%
The strengthening of the European Parliament in the European Union	15.5%	11.6%
Nothing, sovereignty is the expression of citizens who have no say at European level	12.8%	8.7%
Nothing, sovereignty is linked solely to the nation-state	9.4%	9%
Do not know/prefer not to answer	18.3%	36.1%

Source: Survey, November–December 2023

Regarding the trends suggested by socio-economic and political variables, a higher level of interest in politics and of support for national and/or European institutions predisposes to having a more positive interpretation of European sovereignty. Conversely, a positioning on the extreme right of the political spectrum is correlated with a stronger opinion that European sovereignty means “nothing” because “sovereignty is the expression of citizens who do not have their say at the European level” or is “linked only to the nation-state”. Besides, interpretations of “European sovereignty” reflect general attitudes towards Europe. Thus, people who define themselves as “only French/Belgian” are more likely to disconnect the notion of European sovereignty of any link with a European identity and to contest its very existence by relating sovereignty exclusively to the nation-state.

Priorities for the Policy Implementation of ‘European Sovereignty’ in France and Belgium

Beyond the knowledge and interpretations of the ESN, another key element is the policy domains that the EU should prioritise according to our respondents to reinforce European sovereignty. Six issues are proposed in the questionnaire in reference to domains of public action where the ESN is especially developed. However, in contrast to previous questions that refer to the knowledge and interpretation of the ESN as it is told by European and national institutions and leaders, the focus here is on citizens’ *preferences*. Still, the options offered to the choice of the respondents revolve around existing domains where the ESN is particularly salient, and are consequently related to an interpretation of sovereignty mainly as political capacity (rather than as European identity or popular sovereignty). To synthesise, data presented in Table 3 indicates the presence in the top three answers (out of six).

A preliminary remark is that the rate of “don’t know/prefer not to answer” of Belgian respondents (26.6%) is again significantly higher than that of French respondents (16.5%) – a reminder that the notion of sovereignty is not as familiar in Belgium and thus more difficult to implement through specific policy areas. A first observation is that the hierarchy of priorities given by respondents in France and Belgium is strikingly similar: (1) security, including defence and counterterrorism; (2) control of migration and integration; (3) environmental and energy matters; (4) relations with neighbouring countries; (5) ability to defend EU economic interests; (6) capacity to innovate and regulate new technologies. Overall, French respondents express in a slightly stronger way their support for the assertion of EU sovereignty in terms of political capacity (especially regarding the military and the regulation of technology, two traditional French ‘regalian’ domains, the rest being close to the margin of errors). These elements are in line with other recent survey-based research showing that citizens’ perceptions of specific policy designs may vary according to national priorities and traditions (see Nicoli et al., 2025).

A second observation is that the order of policy priorities for asserting EU sovereignty, as identified by citizens, differs slightly from the ESN as told by European and national institutions and leaders, particularly with regard to one issue: There is clear support for prioritising the EU's political capacity in security domains such as defence, counter-terrorism and migration control, but less so for economic policy, innovation and technology regulation. This suggests that focusing on 'Market Europe' as the main framework for developing a narrative of European sovereignty may not be the best way to gain citizens' support.

Table 3. Comparison in France and Belgium of the Policy Priorities to Assert 'European Sovereignty'. Presence in the Top 3 Answers

In your opinion, in asserting its sovereignty, the EU should give priority to... Rank from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important) NB: Data indicates the presence in the top three answers (out of six), as well as the non-response rate. As respondents could select multiple answers, the total number of responses exceeds 100%.	France	Belgium
Security, by strengthening its military capacity and its fight against terrorism	60.8%	52.1%
Controlling migratory flows and integration	52.9%	51.0%
Setting an example in environmental and energy matters	45%	40.1%
Its relations with the countries in its immediate neighbourhood	37.4%	33%
The European Union's ability to defend its economic interests	31.1%	28.8%
Its capacity to innovate and regulate new technologies	23.1%	15.1%
Do not know/prefer not to answer	16.5%	26.6%

Source: Survey, November–December 2023

To sum up, the slight differences between the French and Belgian hierarchy of priority issues to assert European sovereignty may bode well for the ability of the EU to develop a narrative that is likely to circulate transnationally. However, EU institutions are much better used and equipped to promote an agenda centred on the market (competitiveness, regulation, and innovation) than on what concerns traditionally "regalian" tasks related to the traditional monopoly of coercion exercised by nation-states, such as defence, police, and territorial control (Jabko, 2006; Kelemen & McNamara, 2022). This finding converges with the widely held view in the literature that the domains remaining for the development of new EU competencies to meet citizens' expectations regarding sovereignty are also the most difficult to Europeanise (Bartolini, 2005; Fligstein, 2008).

Beyond National Boundaries, Ideological Cleavages? European Sovereignty as a Right-Wing Narrative

National boundaries are not the only factor shaping the reception of the ESN. Ideological cleavages also matter. Both in France and in Belgium (see Table 4), when they are asked what the priorities are to assert European sovereignty, citizens self-positioned on the right side of the political spectrum mention the EU's military capacity and the control of migration flows. By contrast, citizens self-positioned on the left refer to investment in environmental protection as a global example of what 'European sovereignty' should be about.

Table 4: First Preference in France and Belgium Regarding the Priority for 'European Sovereignty' Crossed With Ideological Self-Positioning (1 is Far Left, 10 is Far Right)

In your opinion, in asserting its sovereignty, The EU should give priority to: /Answers for France (F) and Belgium (B)	1-2 (left)	3-5	6-8	9-10 (right)
Security, by reinforcing the EU's military capacity and its fight against terrorism	F: 4.6% B: 6.9%	F: 23.1% B: 24.3%	F: 27.8% B: 31.1%	F: 24.1% B: 33.2%
Controlling migration flows	F: 6.3% B: 18.5%	F: 18.7% B: 14.8%	F: 27.3% B: 18.7%	F: 35.8% B: 27.5%
Its exemplary nature in environmental and energy matters	F: 37.3% B: 28.8%	F: 20.1% B: 13.4%	F: 10.0% B: 10.0%	F: 5.6% B: 7.4%
Its neighbourhood relations with countries in its close vicinity	F: 10.2% B: 6.3%	F: 10.0% B: 10.7%	F: 8.5% B: 6.0%	F: 2.0% B: 2.5%
The European Union's ability to defend its economic interests	F: 9.3% B: 7.2%	F: 6.6% B: 5.4%	F: 5.7% B: 6.6%	F: 5.7% B: 1.1%
Its capacity for innovation and regulation of new technologies	F: 6.9% B: 4.6%	F: 5.0% B: 2.6%	F: 6.2% B: 3.2%	F: 9.0% B: 2.6%
Do not know/prefer not to answer	F: 25.5% B: 27.7%	F: 16.5% B: 28.7%	F: 14.6% B: 24.4%	F: 17.9% B: 25.7%

Source: Survey, November–December 2023

This influence of political positioning on the priorities defined to assert European sovereignty takes us back to two previous observations on the French case. In national politics, individuals defining themselves as voting for the left tend to equate sovereignty with nationalism and consider it more negatively, while those voting for the right refer it to independence, and see it in a more positive light. However, at

the supranational level, the perception of *European* sovereignty is less impacted by the left-right cleavage and more by the pro/anti Europe schism (Finchelstein, 2024). It remains to be seen whether external events enhancing the necessity to reinforce European defence and security (such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the re-election of Donald Trump in the US in 2024) will contribute to a convergence on the priorities associated to the ESN beyond ideological cleavages or, on the contrary, if the reinforcement of the far-right during the 2024 EU elections (Mudde, 2024) and in several later national elections (Deloy, 2025) will polarise even more the perception of the ESN along a left-right continuum.

Discussion and Conclusion: The National Filtering of European Sovereignty

Our research started from a blind spot in the increasing academic attention given to the 'narrative turn' in EU legitimisation: the *reception* of European political narratives. Among the many cleavages likely to fragment this reception, national boundaries remain prominent. This is especially true for a notion intimately linked with nation-state building, such as sovereignty. We chose two countries that represent different ways to relate to sovereignty in order to explore the transnational variations in the perception of the ESN: France and Belgium. France stands for the ideal type of a 'strong state' where national sovereignty lies in the hands of public institutions in internal affairs and is a driving force in foreign and European politics. Belgium is a 'weak state', sharing the exercise of internal sovereignty between multiple actors and pooling external sovereignty in multilateral settings such as the EU.

Methodologically, we relied on an online survey of a representative sample of the French and Belgian population to study the citizens' perceptions of the ESN in terms of knowledge, meanings, policy priorities and its relation to the left-right ideological cleavage. Our findings show two main things. First, the French are significantly more aware than the Belgians of the notion of European sovereignty, as their national leaders have consistently advocated it as a constitutive dimension of polity-making and as an extension of French sovereignty. Thus, both in terms of congruence with their political culture and of the frequency of cues given by political elites, our French respondents are more used to the sovereignty rhetoric. By contrast, Belgian respondents are much more likely to have never heard about the ESN and to refuse or struggle with interpreting it and defining policy priorities to implement it.

Second, despite this significant divergence in terms of the level of knowledge, our findings indicate that the meanings and priorities attached to the ESN are relatively similar in both countries. Regarding its meaning, the ESN is mostly understood as referring to *political sovereignty* as the capacity of the EU to defend its economic interests and security, then to an expression of a feeling of European identity, and last

(and least) to *popular sovereignty* as the possibility (or not) for the citizens to be heard at the EU level. National nuances do exist, but these nuances remain limited, and the hierarchy of meanings is largely the same in the two member states.

The same is true for the policy priorities defined for the implementation of European sovereignty. Belgian and French respondents rank in the same order the domains of public action that the EU should privilege: security concerns (defence, counterterrorism, control of migration) come first, followed by environmental and energy matters; relations with neighbouring countries; and economic challenges (defence of economic interests, capacity to innovate and regulate new technologies). Transnational convergences are nuanced by some national specificities (e.g. French respondents being slightly keener than Belgians to advocate public interventionism). Beyond national differences, our data shows the importance of the left-right cleavage in the knowledge, meanings and priorities given to European sovereignty, with an emphasis on security issues by respondents self-positioned on the right side of the ideological spectrum.

The hierarchy and nature of issues defined by citizens as priorities to assert European sovereignty suggest a blind spot in our research that deserves more attention in the future. These issues refer to the GAL-TAN cleavage – Green/Alternative/Libertarian (GAL) on one side, and Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist (TAN) on the other – which situates supranational integration at the centre of debates and has played an increasingly significant role in structuring political conflict within the EU over the past decade (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). On one hand, European sovereignty is embedded within a GAL-leaning narrative that sees greater integration as essential to strengthen the EU's capacity to regulate transnational challenges such as climate change. Sovereignty is not diminished by pooling it at the EU level, but rather redefined as an instrument of collective agency. However, on the other hand, the conceptual appeal of European sovereignty also draws on a more realist logic that has traditionally been more characteristic of TAN-leaning narratives. This logic reframes the EU as a geopolitical actor in the global context marked by the strategic competition with big powers such as the US or China, but also by migration. In this reading, European sovereignty entails a focus on protecting borders, ensuring territorial integrity, building a common European defence and asserting control over internal and external security. These concerns have typically been mobilised by TAN-aligned actors first in national frameworks (Hoegliger, 2016) and then reframed under the banner of European sovereignty.

Our findings suggest that the ESN may accommodate both the GAL-inspired normative aspirations of a post-national Europe and the TAN-leaning ones of geopolitical and civilisational survival. For GAL-aligned actors, it provides a pro-European narrative of adaptation to current threats beyond nationalist concerns, as illustrated by a recent public letter signed by public intellectuals such as Étienne Balibar

(Collectif, 2026). For TAN-aligned actors, it presents a means of reclaiming control over strategic domains without reverting to narrow Eurosceptic nationalism (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2021). Here, sovereignty is no longer the exclusive property of the nation-state but becomes increasingly hybrid and layered, compatible with further European integration. Therefore, the ESN contributes to making the GAL pole more right-wing and the TAN pole more pro-European. Our survey points in this direction, although the limited size of our sample did not allow us to go further in the analysis with sufficient reliability. More research is needed to evaluate further this hypothesis.

Overall, our research highlights the resilience of the national frames inherited from historical processes of nation-state building in the reception of European narratives. This national filtering can support the scenario of a Europeanisation from within national narratives rather than the top-down advocacy of “one size fits all” supranational stories. However, the commensurability of national interpretations in two different member states is to some extent evidence that unity in diversity is possible within distinct symbolic shapes: between those who know and ‘believe in’ sovereignty, the French, and those who know and believe a bit less, the Belgians. In this sense, another promising research avenue could be the study of the interactions between national receptions of European narratives (for example, the extent to which the connections between France and French-speaking Belgium can impact the perception of European sovereignty). Further research on a broader sample of country cases is also required to analyse the link between sovereignty in its different dimensions and national identity, and to compare the reception of the ESN with that of other European political narratives less anchored in the path dependence of nation-state building.

Looking at the broader picture, what can be said regarding the possible contribution of the ESN to the legitimisation of the EU? Two remarks come to the fore. First, the meanings and priorities granted by our respondents to the ESN tend to focus on issues of ‘hard power’ (security, defence) for which European institutions have limited competences and even less predilection. Past experiences – from the failure of the European community of defence in 1954 to the difficult management of the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in 2015–2016 – promise a bumpy ride if these citizens’ views are taken as a roadmap towards the assertion of European sovereignty. The Commission’s initiatives to increase member states’ military spending through the ‘defence package’ or the European Democracy Shield may offer a window of opportunity, but they are hardly framed in terms of European sovereignty (European Commission, 2025). The main contemporary policy issue where the ESN is salient is digital policy, particularly considering the recent introduction of the European Tech Sovereignty package by the European Commission (2026).

Second, after surging in popularity over the last decade, the ESN seems to have lost its charismatic appeal, with the more realistic and value-neutral concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ increasingly replacing it. It is barely mentioned in major policy roadmaps for the EU’s future, such as the Draghi (2024) and Letta (2024) reports (six and four occurrences, respectively), nor in the von der Leyen State of the Union Address on 10 September 2025 (two occurrences), where it is almost exclusively related to ‘digital/tech sovereignty’ in the context of regulating social media networks and artificial intelligence. On these issues, the ESN prioritises innovation, economic performance and jurisdictional independence over citizens’ rights and agency (Mügge, 2024) and is viewed, at best, as an appealing yet ineffective (Carver, 2024) and contentious (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2024) narrative. These developments may reinforce the perception of the ESN as a power-driven, market-friendly narrative that contributes to the ‘slow death of popular sovereignty’ (Beetz, 2024). There is a risk that the ESN will appear increasingly disconnected from, and even averse to, the democratisation of the EU. In this sense, the ‘sovereign turn’ in EU affairs is more related to the ‘geopoliticisation’ of the EU to tackle external challenges (Meunier & Nicolaidis, 2019; Verellen, 2020) than to citizens’ expectations regarding accountability and participation. This could increase the populist backlash against Europe, as critics may argue that the EU is ignoring grassroots claims (Schmidt, 2023) and celebrating sovereignty while also violating it. Meanwhile, the ESN could also (and possibly simultaneously) reinforce a sense of solidarity against external threats.

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