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Nested, Pooled, or Exclusively National? Contested Sovereignty Models in Debates on the Future of Europe

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Abstract

The increasing electoral support for right-wing and far-right parties in Europe has brought the question of sovereignty back to the forefront of debates on European integration. These parties often challenge the transfer of national powers to the EU, making sovereignty a central point of contention. The main axis of the dispute on the shape and future of the EU lies between views calling for deeper integration and those advocating the protection of national competencies. Exemplified by the calls of French President Emmanuel Macron, the notion of "European sovereignty" contradicts sovereign claims centred on the preservation of national sovereignty and even on repatriating parts of national competencies back to member states. At the theoretical level, we reveal how the notion of sovereignty intersects with and transforms the existing constitutional democratic visions of the EU. This article focuses on how political actors contest the division of competencies in the EU. We analyse this by mapping how political actors use the notion(s) of sovereignty in their discourses on European integration. The plenary debates on the future of Europe from the national parliaments of Germany, France, and Poland serve as our empirical material. We conducted a qualitative analysis of 45 plenary debates from the German Bundestag, the French Assemblée nationale, and the Polish Sejm, from 2015 to 2021. This timeframe marks a key phase of intense debate and redefinition of the EU's future. Through our comparative analysis, we identified three models of sovereignty related to key constitutional visions of the EU and demonstrated how they are constructed and understood by partisan actors in the three countries and where the key controversies lie. We also show that politicians instrumentally use models of sovereignty corresponding to the domestic political dynamics.

Keywords

European Union; France; future of Europe; Germany; national parliaments; Poland; sovereignty

1. Introduction

The main axis of the debates on the EU's *finalité politique* lies between views calling for deepening integration within the Union and those advocating the protection of national competencies. The resulting proposals on how to steer the EU vary significantly, constituting a core dimension of contestation in European politics (Góra et al., in press). The key concept underlying the discussions on the nature of the European polity and its relationship to the nation–state is sovereignty, which demarcates the scope of political authority.

Despite becoming a buzzword of EU integration in recent years, the meanings of sovereignty are contested, and it is used for legitimising different positions on European integration. Sovereignty serves as an empty signifier—it allows political actors to fill it with a meaning that implies certain visions of European integration and to capture collective imaginaries. Therefore, untangling these competing meanings of sovereignty can serve as a key to analyse the current narratives on the EU's future. Against this context, the main aim of this article is to provide a comparative analysis of discursive articulations of sovereignty in the context of debates on the future of Europe in three key EU member states: Germany, France, and Poland. By locating the empirical analysis in national parliaments, we can observe how key political parties articulate sovereignty and where the conflictual lines lie.

The empirical material used for this article covers the period between 2015 and the early 2020s. This was a time of intensive discussions on sovereignty and its relations to EU integration, when major rearticulations of the European integration visions took place. President Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech (on 26 September 2017), his notion of European sovereignty, and the heated discussion it triggered illustrate the case. The emergence of the concept of European strategic autonomy marks the end of the initial phase of the debate.

This article is structured in the following manner: Sections 2 and 3 present theoretical debates on sovereignty and elaborate an analytical approach for the analysis of sovereignty models in the context of the narratives on the future of European integration. This is followed by Section 4, which presents the position of national parliaments in our selected cases, an overview of the empirical material, and the way the research was conducted. In Sections 5, 6, and 7, we identify and analyse in a comparative manner the theoretical models of sovereignty in three parliaments, focusing on the party positions in each country underpinning the concrete visions.

2. From National to European? Understanding Sovereignty in the European Context

Sovereignty relates to the core internal and external powers of a state. As Bellamy defines it: "[S]overeignty implies being subject to no other authority at home and the equal of other sovereigns abroad" (Bellamy, 2019, p. 74). The notion and its meaning have been debated for centuries and intertwined with nation, independence, and nationalism. As it frequently symbolises exclusive national identity formation patterns, it is specifically relevant in the vocabulary of nationalists, nativists, and Eurosceptics, even if its meaning often remains ambiguous (Borriello & Brack, 2019; Brack et al., 2019; Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024; Góra & Zielińska, 2024).

Domestically, sovereignty is understood as the supreme authority of a polity that indicates an ability to control the Weberian trio of people, territory, and borders. The key dynamic of competing visions on sovereignty in contemporary Europe is between those promoting the zero-sum exclusivist vision of sovereignty in the Bodinian sense and those who perceive it as a commodity to be shared and pooled, especially in the deeply interdependent reality of late globalisation. Hence, domestically, sovereignty has become a key currency of the new Rokkanian cleavage between communitarianism and cosmopolitanism (De Wilde et al., 2019; Zürn & De Wilde, 2016). It speaks to the previously known divide, the so-called "sovereignty dimension" (Hutter et al., 2016) that demarcates supranationalists from more nationalistic views on the course of further integration. With the rise of populists, scholars also noted new calls for popular or parliamentary sovereignty (Borriello & Brack, 2019).

Externally, sovereignty means that there is no power above the sovereign entity—it is equal to other sovereign units. In a globalised world, however, such an ideal is essentially unachievable. International organisations, primarily the EU, are developing features that pool sovereignty from the member states and create a political system that competes with nation–states in terms of their competencies. Pooled sovereignty at the supranational level has created a novel theoretical challenge of how it can coincide with the established meaning of (national) sovereignty understood in indivisible terms (Fossum et al., 2020).

The notion of European sovereignty illustrates a key attempt to address this challenge and develop the concept of supranational sovereignty and European strategic culture. The proposal resonated in the EU and provoked intensive debate (Roch & Oleart, 2024). Nonetheless, scholars note that this concept is contested and has a blurred definition, linked primarily to strategic autonomy understood as a means to achieve European sovereignty, and to a fully fledged power Europe (Dumoulin, 2020; Lefebvre & Simon, 2021). The concept has already entered the official EU discourse (European Commission, 2021) and scholars are measuring how it is used to legitimise the EU project against populist right-wing sovereignism (Roch & Oleart, 2024).

3. Sovereignty and the Constitutional–Democratic Visions of the EU

The current debate on the future of Europe as pursued by partisan actors tends to follow the main distinctive visions of European integration: federal, intergovernmental, and sovereignist (Bellamy, 2019; Eriksen & Fossum, 2012; Fabbrini, 2019; Fossum, 2021). The federal model foresees the creation over time of a system with a division of powers, with a clear separation between executive and legislative powers at the supranational level. The EU will not only develop a single and coherent decision-making system, but also possess autonomous budgetary and fiscal power. It will have separate sovereignty accommodated with member states' sovereignty (Fossum, 2021). Accordingly, the ultimate feature of this model is that the EU decides how to divide competences between national and European levels. The idea of shifting sovereignty to a higher level of a larger unit is functionally motivated, as its proponents see it as a functional response to globalisation and growing interdependence. Sovereignty intrinsically links with the populace, which serves as a sovereign in democratic systems. Hence, the complication for this European distinctive federal sovereignty is (so far) a lack of (and remote prospects for creation of) a European nation or people defined as "possessing the capacity to deliberate in a public way about the public interest" (Bellamy, 2019, p. 84). Drawing an analogy with studies on collective identification in the EU (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Góra & Zielińska, 2019; Risse, 2010), the model of sovereignty that we derived from the federal vision of European

integration is not zero-sum European sovereignty, but rather a model of multilevel sovereignty where the national component is nested in European sovereignty, that we named "nested (European) sovereignty." Its main characteristic is that the EU obtains sovereignty from member states as a distinctive unit, but not at their complete expense. It is rather a dynamic model that indicates the direction of change of continuous pooling of sovereignty to the EU, at the same time limiting the national reservoir. The choice of the areas of governance in which sovereignty is to be relocated to the EU level is often based on functional needs. It is guided by the principle of subsidiarity, aiming to deliver solutions that cannot be effectively achieved at a lower level of governance.

On the other hand, republican intergovernmentalism stresses the central role of member states in the EU integration and polity, with the EU as:

> A republican association of sovereign states that is designed to overcome the possibility for their mutual domination while providing a mechanism for their securing certain global goods and avoiding various global bads, not least through their reciprocal recognition of rights to citizenship. (Bellamy, 2019, p. 72)

Member states are vessels carrying sovereignty and in control of all functions in a given territory. Moreover, within that narrative, the key notion is that democracy is based on popular sovereignty, which is embodied by national structures and strongly advocates safeguarding national democracy. The EU, by contrast, can develop its competencies, but its actions need to be clearly indicated in the treaties of which member states are masters and determiners. Legitimacy is vested in the states, which may delegate it to the EU.

A model that has acquired prominence recently is a sovereignist vision deriving from the intergovernmental position but putting national sovereignty and its defence at its heart (Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024). Contemporary sovereignists preach "a holy alliance between nationalism and populism" (Fabbrini, 2019, p. 62) and, therefore, "new sovereignism refers to the belief in the primacy of the nation-state, governed according to the principle of popular sovereignty, over inter—and supranational governance structures and the 'transnational' sphere of economic and social activity" (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017, p. 34). For sovereignists, in contrast to republican intergovernmentalism, sovereignty is not a feature of the national democratic origin of European integration, but it is a key asset that should be promoted against supranational enemies. It is clearly an "exclusively national sovereignty" model.

The key element differentiating republican intergovernmentalism from sovereignism is the approach to the consequences of the way sovereignty is constructed in the context of European integration. Sovereignism assumes only zero-sum national sovereignty that is primarily exclusive and accepts sharing sovereignty to very limited (mostly economic) areas. Similarly to identity, sovereignty can be vested in one vessel—the nation–state (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). However, Bellamy's (2019) republican component nuances this set-up into a more positive-sum segmented sovereignty approach. The model that we refer to as "pooled sovereignty" assumes that there is:

> A double form of delegation, whereby citizens exercising popular sovereignty at the domestic level delegate their respective representatives to make agreements with each other at the inter-polity level, including delegating and devolving authority upwards to appropriate regulatory bodies, so long as these remain under their joint and equal control. (Bellamy, 2019, p. 90)

In this model, pooling sovereignty is possible (similarly to models of collective identification where national and European elements coexist), but needs to be authorised by states which cede it not to another entity but to a common unit that they build and govern. This model mostly assumes that it is desirable to pool sovereignty, but the scope/extent of this pooling depends on the policy areas. Table 1 below summarises the different sovereignty models with their specific characteristics, used as indicators of discursive practices.

Table 1. Conceptualisation of sovereignty models in constitutional-democratic visions of the EU.

	Constitutional–democratic visions of the EU	Key indicators of discursive practices
Nested (European) sovereignty	Federal(ising) Union	• The EU can develop sovereignty independently from member states (in time); • Assumes ceding sovereignty to the EU by member states (even if only in certain areas); • European sovereignty embraces national sovereignty and strengthens it; • In some instances, the EU can be sovereign at the (almost complete) expense of member states.
Pooled sovereignty	Republican intergovernmentalism	• Member states cede sovereignty to a common unit in which they all participate directly; • Pooling is accepted in some areas (functional) and is less likely in core state competences; • Restricted areas where sovereignty is pooled and guided by subsidiarity; • Member states and their institutions control common units (i.e., national parliaments and governments).
Exclusively national sovereignty	Sovereignist intergovernmentalism (focusing on economic integration)	• Nation–state as the sole possessor of sovereignty; • Sharing sovereignty is either limited and reversible or rejected; • Demands to repatriate competences back to the nation–state (specifically from the European Commission in areas other than the economy).

The presented models of sovereignty are derived from broader theoretical frameworks that demonstrate the possible paths of development of different scenarios for European integration. We argue that focusing on sovereignty helps to capture the internal reconfiguration of power, institutional settings, divisions of competences, and rearticulation of legitimacy that are entangled in such frameworks. In the following sections, we test that claim. By analysing how different models of sovereignty are articulated by political actors in different national settings and how they link with the broader models of European integration, we test the usefulness of these models. Additionally, we aim to capture the rearticulations of visions of the future of European integration and democracy during the intensive debates on the future of the EU. The empirical findings presented in the following parts of this article help to nuance the necessary rendering of the models of sovereignty and map the key tensions as visible in political discourse.

4. Methodological Remarks

Recent scholarship stresses the significance of contestation (conflicts over meanings) of key concepts ordering our contemporary democratic systems. The contestation takes the form of "conceptual flipsiding" that involves "the strategic reversal of notions" embedded with a specific system of meaning and reversing it, as documented by Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska (2024) in the case of constructing illiberal imagination. The strategy of flipsiding is used to reconceptualise and normalise new understandings of key political concepts. Following such logic, our study focuses on identifying the partisan actors in the selected parliaments who use the concept of sovereignty, what meanings it is associated with and how it links and/or modifies constitutional-democratic visions of the EU.

The research focus on parliamentarian arenas that we treat as "discursive fields" (Keller, 2011), "social arenas constituted around contested issues, truth claims, and problematisations, in which discourses compete with one another, attempting to impose the dominant interpretation of an issue in question" (Góra & Zielińska, 2019, p. 339). The transcripts of plenary debates collected in the lower chambers of the parliaments—the German Bundestag, the French Assemblée nationale, and the Polish Sejm—serve as our empirical materials. The focus on national parliaments results from their growing role in European integration. They hold oversight functions but also provide an important venue for deliberation on EU policies (De Wilde & Raunio, 2018) and play the role of informing citizens on policy issues (Auel & Raunio, 2014, p. 13). All three countries belong to the EU's "Big Five" in terms of population. However, they follow different dynamics regarding the current debate on the future of Europe. Germany's role in the EU has become more critical with the succession of crises the EU has faced, but in the analysed period also witnessed the growth of the radical right-wing party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which contested the foundations of Germany's European stance. Considered an "indispensable policy broker," Germany and its strong economy have increasingly been able to set a vision for the EU (Krotz & Maher, 2016, p. 1055). With the election of the Euro-enthusiastic French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017, France expanded its leadership role in the EU, pushing for deeper integration in several policy areas, notably defence. The European security and defence policy has long been the core of discussions on the prospects of deepening European integration. Germany's position on this matter remains ambivalent: while retaining a position of "good European" aiming at strengthening European integration, its commitment to European defence remains mostly symbolic (Bunde, 2021, p. 255), despite the challenges of taming the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. In spite of this slight divergence, the close cooperation between France and Germany has operated as a push towards more integration in the EU. Poland, on the other hand, is a newer member state. It shifted in 2015 from the position of a poster child of EU enlargement and a success story of democratisation to an EU challenger ruled by right-wing and Eurosceptic parties. Moreover, growing illiberal tendencies and strong Euroscepticism in Poland coexisted until 2023 with high support for European integration, making an interesting case for studying how political actors were using sovereignty to justify their political choices.

A total of 45 parliamentary debates in the three parliaments were selected from 2015 to 2021. We established a specific protocol for selecting debates across the three national contexts. To have an overview of the discussion on the EU in national parliaments, we collected debates related to the future of Europe and diverse (institutional) reforms requested by MPs. Furthermore, we also selected debates on specific issues and crises touching upon the EU's future integration, i.e., Eurozone and migration (see Table 2). We pinpointed key European events and Council meetings related to integration issues and, based on this, we

primarily selected discussions following governments' information on EU affairs (see the list of selected debates in Annex 1 in the Supplementary File). Hence, despite differences as to how these themes were debated in the respective parliaments, the selection makes comparison possible. Once debates were selected, we used a set of keywords, identified in the pilot study and based on a review of the literature on the subject matter (see Annex 2 in the Supplementary File), to pinpoint the discursive events actualising the discourses on sovereignty. Our main units of analysis are individual speeches by MPs, which we treat as articulations of discourse on European integration. All identified speeches were described with variables specifying the party affiliations and manually coded with a codebook derived from the models presented in the Section 3. The qualitative analysis of the coded fragments allowed us to identify how sovereignty is discursively constructed in the debates on the future of Europe in the three parliaments in question and how it relates to the discussed models of European integration. To illustrate the specific models and the key tensions, we provided the quotes that were most representative of the observed patterns of discursive constructions.

Table 2. Overview of analysed empirical material in three parliaments (2015–2021).

	French Assemblée nationale	German Bundestag	Polish Sejm
Number of debates	16	16	13
• Future of Europe	6	6	6
• Migration	5	5	6
• Eurozone	5	5	1
Number of speeches by MPs	500	200	252
Number of analysed speeches identified by keywords	344	180	141

Notes: We exclude speeches related to technical interventions in organising the plenary. The analysed speeches include only speeches that contain one or more of the selected keywords (see Annex 2 in the Supplementary File). The parliamentary debates also include speeches of executive actors; however, our analysis only covered the speeches by MPs.

The existing research reveals that partisan divisions are crucial in promoting models of sovereignty and related constitutional–democratic visions of the EU. The ideological divisions of left and right, as well as positions on the pro- and anti-European scale, determine political parties' stances in such debates (Leruth & Lord, 2015). Against this background, we expect parties favouring European integration to advocate for more EU competencies. Hence, such parties will be more likely to extend the meaning of the concept of sovereignty (i.e., nested or pooled model) to justify European integration and reconfiguration of power relations between supranational and national levels. On the contrary, Eurosceptic parties would rather stick to an exclusively national sovereignty and, therefore, advocate for repatriation of national competencies or keep the current EU institutional status quo. In addition, we assume that the pooled model is useful for parties in government as it allows them, through a mechanism of restricted areas of pooling sovereignty, to argue for the advancement of European integration while claiming at the same time that national sovereignty is protected. We are aware that individual MPs' speeches are not always identical to the party positions. However, for our research aims, analysing the individual articulations of sovereignty in relation to European integration was crucial both for identifying the patterns and for exploring and understanding the possible tensions that exist in partisan discourse on sovereignty.

These assumptions are strengthened by the observed dynamics of the debates on sovereignty in our case studies. Scholars note a renewed discussion about sovereignty on the French political scene in the context of

the Covid-19 pandemic, where all parties and even trade unions mention and interpret sovereignty in different ways (Andréani, 2020). In Germany, traditionally, we observe a complicated relationship with the notion of sovereignty, not in the Grundgesetz but mostly developed through jurisprudence (Bieber, 2013). In Poland, due to historical developments, sovereignty is rather sacrosanct, and any idea of sharing it is perceived by many as a political cost of European integration (Góra & Mach, 2010).

5. Nested (European) Sovereignty: Unclear Meanings and Rare Proponents

In reference to Macron's Sorbonne speech, the concept of European sovereignty was extensively debated in the Assemblée nationale. While during Macron's address, this concept was developed alongside six core elements, European sovereignty was only broadly defined in French parliamentary debates. Seen as a "complementarity between what belongs to the nation and what belongs to Europe" (N. Loiseau, 2017–11-27; all citations from MPs' contributions are drawn from the debates selected for analysis and the list of these debates is provided in Annex 1 of the Supplementary File), European sovereignty—as framed especially by MPs from the governing La République En Marche! (REM) party—bridged national and European interests. Therefore, national and European sovereignty were not seen as conflicting, but rather as supporting each other. The concept of European sovereignty as framed by REM MPs and government representatives included an inside and outside EU perspective, i.e., the protection of the EU and its citizens, as well as the EU's capacity to act on the global stage:

> This sovereign Europe is itself based on three conditions: the unity of Europe, the protection of its citizens and its interests, and what I call the projection capacity of the European Union, that is to say its capacity to act as a global player, to really weigh on international issues and to disseminate its model and its values. (J.-Y. Le Drian, 2017–10-10)

A sovereign EU consequently implied European interests to be protected and a European citizenry. These two core elements were deemed non-existent by the parliamentary opposition, which criticised the concept of European sovereignty.

Some nuances of this nested (European) sovereignty can be detected in the MPs' discourse, especially on the prioritisation and weight given to the two types of sovereignty. On the one hand, several MPs highlighted the shared links and reciprocity between national and European sovereignty in the prospect of contributing to strengthening the EU. The EU's (perceived) role, power, and capacity in the global arena were considered as important elements of European sovereignty, in the aim of building a:

> Geopolitical unit which inspires the world in both respect for the law and the authority of the power; a Europe which protects as much as a Europe which exchanges, a Europe which shines as much as a Europe which trades, a Europe of realities as much as a Europe of principles. (J.-L. Bourlanges, 2017–10-10)

On the other hand, several MPs depicted European sovereignty as contributing to the nation–state's power and protection of interests. The EU and its subsequent yet-to-be-implemented European sovereignty were thus rather perceived as a booster to promote and protect EU member states' interests in a nested way:

The sovereignty of France today passes through that of Europe. This sovereignty, which is the opposite of an identarian withdrawal, is a concrete, real notion that allows our country to be heard by the great world powers. Today, it cannot be conceived outside the European Union. (J.-F. Mbaye, 2018–04-18)

Hence, although the term coined by Macron, "European sovereignty," was present in French debates, its meaning and implications remained vague in several MPs' speeches, sometimes blending elements of both the nested and pooled sovereignty models.

A comparable conception of European sovereignty was not detected in German parliamentary debates. MPs indeed tended to always specify particular policy areas in which sovereignty might be shared—characteristic of the pooled sovereignty model. Nonetheless, AfD MPs criticised Macron's idea of European sovereignty and his vision of Europe where "Germany pays, France decides" (N. Kleinwächter, 2019–01-17).

The conceptualisation of national sovereignty as nested in the European one occurred in the debates in the Polish parliament triggered by the increased politicisation of European affairs on the Polish political scene. Such views were mostly represented by MPs from liberal and pro-European parties, e.g., Platforma Obywatelska (PO) and Nowoczesna. However, similarly to the German case, the proponents rarely referred to "European sovereignty." In addition, they often mixed the nested and pooled sovereignty models—both shared between national and European, but lacking detail as to whether the sharing is limited to restricted areas (as in the pooled model) or is nested within European sovereignty. They conceptualised the EU as a solidarity union, composed of states overcoming their particularistic national interests. Belonging to such a union constitutes a condition for sustaining Poland's sovereignty and for fulfilling its national interests. Such views also envisaged a desired position of Poland within the EU—actively involved in EU issues, responsible for shaping the bloc's agenda and policies as well as taking responsibility for the future of the community—"One cannot be an EU member selectively" (M. Golbik, 2016–12-01). Such involvement and central position were seen as a guarantee of the reflection of Polish interests in the broader EU agenda and as offering Poland a better and more powerful position, achievable only through "shared sovereignty":

We gained a historic opportunity to place Poland in the centre of Europe, so Poland could decide on Europe's future, be one of the main European players…..There is a shared sovereignty in Europe. As long as we are in this Union, at any moment we can decide if we are in the middle or not, we can entrust certain competences to European institutions, by common decisions. We have it guaranteed in our Constitution, and we did it by accepting this arrangement in our decision about accession to the EU. (M. Święcicki, 2017–03-23)

The framing of national sovereignty as being strengthened by embedding it within European sovereignty was prompted by the politics of the Zjednoczona Prawica (ZP) government—a political alliance of the Polish right-wing and conservative parties Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), Solidarna Polska, and Porozumienie in power from 2015 to 2023. This alliance was perceived by liberal MPs as contributing to the marginalisation of Poland's position in the EU and was framed as a threat to national sovereignty. The concept of nested (European) sovereignty is articulated in a way that, for its proponents, strengthens national sovereignty, locating it within the broader and stronger unit. In such discursive articulations, there is a specific conceptual flipside that assures the protection of national sovereignty by inserting it in the broader unit rather than diluting it.

6. Pooled Sovereignty: A Solution to Political Problems

While "European sovereignty" was used and discussed at length in the French parliament, German MPs were more sparing in their use of the term "sovereignty." References to some sort of supranational sovereignty were found in a more implicit form. Supranational sovereignty as discussed by German MPs in the Bundestag also took a different shape and (institutional) arrangement from the nested (European) sovereignty debated in the Assemblée nationale, and to some extent in the Sejm. Supranational sovereignty was mostly supported by the ruling coalition, made up of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (CDU/CSU) and the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) parties. While supranational authority and sovereignty were considered as needed, the extent and area of this supranational sovereignty were, nonetheless, restricted, clearly following the pooled model. MPs from the governing coalition were in favour, especially of strengthening European integration in those restricted policy areas that would be profitable for national interests:

> Rather, we need an attractive Europe that people run into out of hope and conviction, a Europe that has concrete benefits. The abolition of national sovereignty alone cannot be that benefit. Rather, it must be a Europe that continues to ensure peace and freedom on the continent, that ensures prosperity for the majority of the people and, above all, ensures the security of our citizens. (F. Hahn, 2017–12-12)

Subsidiarity is mentioned on several occasions and perceived as key for the (future) functioning of the EU (e.g., T. Frei, 2016–04-28). Defence, migration, and the Economic Monetary Union (EMU) were in this respect regarded as areas where sovereignty can be shared, as it goes beyond the nation–state, exemplifying the "need to articulate several levels of sovereignty": "More than ever, we need to come together to talk about a political Europe, a Europe of solidarity or a Europe of defence, and to put these ideas into practice" (Y. Favennec-Bécot, 2021–03-03). Nevertheless, defence and security policy triggered a heated discussion in the Bundestag, exemplifying Germany's ambivalent position towards European defence (Bunde, 2021). The debate on security and defence policy also reflected a conflictual conception of Germany's global role. MPs from the governing coalition and parliamentary majority pictured Germany as a great player in Europe and on the global stage more generally. Nonetheless, this vision of a powerful and militarised Germany is not supported by all MPs, especially from the fringe political parties. Die Linke opposed the development of a Defence Union, regarded as "a Europe of war and armaments" (H. Hänsel, 2017–12-12). Critical of France's military operations in Africa, the AfD also opposed deepening cooperation on security and military matters (R. Lucassen, 2017–12-12).

All reflections on supranational—as well as European—sovereignty in the Bundestag and the Assemblée nationale depicted the Franco-German cooperation as central to the future of Europe. This increased cooperation between France and Germany was therefore seen as a driver of deepening EU integration, although the views on supranational sovereignty differed slightly from nested to pooled in specific policy areas. The close cooperation between the two neighbouring countries triggered contestation from fringe parties, especially the AfD and La France Insoumise (FI). In the wake of the Aachen Treaty and the establishment of the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly, the bilateral cooperation was indeed considered too deep, endangering national interests and autonomy:

> It has always been the line of our party [AfD] that we do not want to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, but we are dealing with a partner [France] with whom the government not only wants to deepen cooperation, but with whom it wants to become practically one. (A. Gauland, 2019–01-17)

In the Sejm, the references to pooled sovereignty occurred mostly in the speeches of MPs from ZP, then-ruling coalition. They emerged especially in the debates about the future of Europe, but we also traced references to this model in the debates on migration. In the MPs' interventions, the involvement of EU institutions (especially the European Commission) in certain areas was often criticised as threatening national sovereignty (which is more in line with exclusivist national sovereignty, demanding repatriation of competences back to nation-states). At the same time, they demanded more EU involvement in other areas, i.e., security issues and the internal market. The latter was clearly visible during the migration crisis, when proposed mechanisms of refugee relocation among EU member states or quotas stirred very negative reactions and accusations of the EU breaching the sovereignty principle or challenging subsidiarity rules. The former, the acceptance of EU responsibility/leading role in certain policy areas, occurred in the debates on the future of Europe, especially in references to the security issues and global challenges, but also in discussions on the internal market. This clearly demonstrates the conflicts between the pooled model, useful for ensuring some of the national interest, and the ideological (populist) stance of the party, positioning itself as the protector of national sovereignty. In addition, in contrast to the debates in the Bundestag and Assemblée nationale, in the Polish parliament, the acceptance of the EU's leading role in particular policies was relayed and built on national sovereignty. Hence, the then-ruling party MPs expressed a very pragmatic approach. While accepting the leading role of the EU in certain policy areas, they also emphasised the sovereignty of nation-states and their primary role in overseeing the EU. This also shows that political actors strategically refer to contrasting models of sovereignty when they see it as useful for their political gains.

7. Exclusively National Sovereignty: A Populist Ideal

In the French parliament, references strictly to national sovereignty were especially made by MPs from conservative and right-wing political parties, e.g., Rassemblement national (RN), Les Républicains (LR), and Debout la France (DLF). This stress on national sovereignty generally went hand in hand with a critique of the EU and of the supranational sovereignty established at the European level:

> [Y]es, we are European, but we will never accept that European integration is done to the detriment of the peoples, by accepting a stronger federalism in which the only future proposed would be that of the dilution of the prerogatives of the states and therefore of their sovereignty. (P. Dumont, 2017–10-10)

Supranational sovereignty was, in this respect, seen as diminishing national sovereignty and conflicting with the protection of national interests. The EU in this regard was regarded as a "prison European Union, which hinders the freedom of countries and which, for its part, is almost exclusively at the service of an ideology: ultraliberal globalism" (M. Le Pen, 2018–02-13). A return to exclusive sovereignty at the nation-state level was therefore called for.

Similar criticism of supranational sovereignty can be observed in the German parliament, especially from AfD MPs: "this autonomy [over budgetary matters] is an inalienable core element of our national sovereignty" (P. Boehringer, 2121–02-25). While explicit references to national sovereignty were limited in

the Bundestag, AfD MPs made numerous references to the protection of national interests. They contested decisions taken at the supranational level, which were seen as endangering Germany's interests: "Of course, we share a common set of values with our European neighbours. But that does not replace national interests" (A. Gauland, 2018–06-28).

In the Sejm, references to exclusively national sovereignty occurred almost solely in the contributions of MPs from the far-right Ruch Narodowy (RN). Such references emerged especially in the context of the debates on migration, and to a lesser extent in those on the future of Europe. RN MP Winnicki referred to the EU as a "super state" that strips nation–states of their sovereignty. He therefore expressed his hope that the EU would disintegrate soon as a result of the political success of nationalistic forces in various EU member states (R. Winnicki, 2016–09-02). Sovereignty was also defined in cultural terms. The EU, because of its proposed policies, including relocation of migrants, was presented as a threat to a state or nation's cultural integrity by representatives of the Ruch Narodowy as well as MPs from the ZP. For these actors, assigning an indivisible and sacrosanct character to national sovereignty allowed them to expand the strong Eurosceptic positions without denouncing European integration.

8. Conclusions

This article has argued that the notion of sovereignty is a useful resource for partisan actors to envision the future of the EU as well as to protect their political agenda. In the nested (European) sovereignty model as it occurred in the analysed debates, national sovereignty does not disappear, nor is it located in any specific policy field. It rests on the assumption that all nation–states in the EU mutually benefit. This is a way in which the federalised vision of European integration accommodates the potential conflict between the European and national levels. Furthermore, such European belonging was seen as reinforcing the various dimensions on which national sovereignty rests, i.e., values, identities, borders, democracy, and the rule of law. The nested sovereignty model was widely debated in France following Macron's initiative, demonstrating a certain disposition toward federal solutions. Nonetheless, while the concept attracted the support of French liberal-centrist MPs (REM and Mouvement démocrate [MD]), the somewhat blurred definition and undefined paths towards concrete implementation were criticised by parties from the opposition on both sides of the political spectrum. In Germany, the model was rather absent, and if mentioned, it was by actors rejecting such an idea. The key proponents of European integration, such as CDU/CSU and SPD, were much more inclined to use the pooled model. In contrast to the French case, where the references to this model of sovereignty aimed at opening a new discussion on the future of the EU, in the Polish case, the nested sovereignty model mostly seemed to serve the internal political dynamics and the politicisation of the EU in the domestic context. It was used to criticise the ruling ZP coalition (2015–2023) for its Eurosceptic views.

The pooled model of sovereignty was favoured by partisan actors in all three analysed contexts and by ideologically diverse parties. In the German and Polish context, this model was invoked by the then-ruling parties as it is useful for arguing for cooperation in selected areas within the EU, while at the same time allowing an indication of some extent of protection for national sovereignty. German MPs distinctly mentioned different policy areas in which supranational pooled sovereignty was seen as beneficial or, in some cases, necessary. Pooled sovereignty was thus limited to issues that cannot be dealt with at the EU member-state level alone, notably in the areas of defence and security, migration policy, and within the

EMU. Similarly, for French MPs, the pooled model was mostly seen as a way to have a stronger voice in the international arena (notably in diplomatic and defence matters), while keeping a firm grip on national affairs without EU interference. The references to pooled sovereignty in the Polish Sejm demonstrate how the ZP needed to present itself as pro-EU and at the same time accommodating its Eurosceptic stance, in that way responding to both the divergences within the coalition as well as different constituencies. They thus made extensive use of the sovereignty argument, but attempted to add to this a European dimension, controlled and shaped by EU member states. However, this was clearly an instrumental way of approaching sovereignty, specifically as some prominent PiS politicians were evidently radicalising discourse on the EU and sovereignty after they moved to the opposition in 2023.

The exclusively national model of sovereignty was advocated in all three contexts by far-right populist parties. It was built on presenting the supranational pooling of sovereignty (even in limited areas) as an unavoidable threat to national sovereignty that is of ultimate value. For these actors, stressing the indivisible and sacrosanct character of national sovereignty was strategically used to solidify the strongly Eurosceptic position (previously Euroreject) without entirely denouncing European integration, a position that many of these partisan actors were struggling to achieve after Brexit. This strategy was characteristic of a sovereignist vision of the EU.

This article has contributed to the literature on European integration and sovereignty by mapping how sovereignty centres the discussions on the development of the EU polity and how political actors choose certain models of sovereignty according to their strategic needs in domestic contexts. Pro-European parties—as expected—favoured both the nested and pooled model, and the more Eurosceptic the party, the more likely it was to refer to the exclusively national model. Interestingly, while liberal and centrist parties opted for nested and pooled models, leftist parties were either less vocal on these issues (the Polish case) or rather supported other dimensions of sovereignty, such as popular sovereignty (specifically French leftist parties). Ultimately, the parties in government—even if Eurosceptic and right-wing, such as the Polish ZP—argued strategically for a pooled model, allowing them to cast themselves as protectors of national sovereignty. However, at the same time, they accept the pooling of sovereignty in specific areas (mostly justified by security arguments). Therefore, the conceptual flipsiding of the notion of sovereignty, its (re)configuration with broader ideas about the future of European integration, and the power relations between national and supranational levels and institutions serve as a useful tool to manoeuvre between the demands of the constituencies and the need to legitimise the party's agenda.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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