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Climate Diplomacy of the Baltic States: The Role of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Annual Climate Change Summits

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***Abstract* – The study compares how Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia publicly address global climate change. Even though the institutions of the European Union play a pivotal role in setting climate change mitigation goals, and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) are submitted collectively, the ambition and involvement vary significantly among different EU member states. Each country has diplomatic tools to negotiate, particularly during the Conference of the Parties (COP), the annual climate conferences held within the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since 1995, as well as through external action. Successful climate diplomacy in this study is understood as proactive participation in the aforementioned conferences, including delivering high-level statements, sizeable delegations, and the involvement of different stakeholders in the process, memberships and propositions in *Climate clubs* aiming at quicker decarbonisation, and contributions to international climate finance by assisting developing countries. Climate diplomacy is evaluated by analysing the documents available on the UNFCCC website regarding participation, statements, and pledges to climate finance. This case study helps to understand the role and negotiating potential of separate EU member states in climate change talks, where each can become frontrunners, passive bystanders or obstructionists in implementing the common EU policy and contributing to global decarbonisation efforts.**

***Keywords* – COP (Conference of the Parties); governance; high-level national statements; national delegation size; net zero emissions; renewable energy.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Mitigating climate change requires action from each country in the world. There is unequivocal evidence that anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are the primary cause of the increase in radiative forcing and, thus, the rise of temperatures in the atmosphere, land, and ocean and more frequent extreme weather events [1]. Although the Baltic States are not among the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change, the changes in precipitation, temperature, and sea level rise in Finland and the Baltic States, particularly in Lithuania, are estimated to be the largest in the EU [2]. Furthermore, the past decade has been notorious worldwide for breaking heat records, and the years 2023 and 2024 were the hottest on record [3]. The Baltic States are no exception, as 2024 was the hottest year since the beginning of measurements in Lithuania and the second hottest in Latvia and Estonia [4]–[7]. According to the IPCC's Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C, the world must reach

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carbon neutrality between 2045 and 2055 to limit the warming below the 1.5 °C threshold [8]. Carbon neutrality means reducing CO_2 emissions by 100 % by achieving a balance between the CO_2 released by human activities and the CO_2 removed from the atmosphere through carbon sequestration, utilising natural carbon sinks and modern technology-based solutions. Sometimes, the term net zero includes the reduction of other GHG emissions. Burning fossil fuels is the primary source of anthropogenic GHG emissions, while approximately 80 % of global energy still comes from fossil fuels [9]. Since all countries need to be involved, the climate change summits under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) framework have been organised since 1995, the most significant annual gathering for climate diplomacy.

Furthermore, all United Nations (UN) countries but three have ratified the Paris Agreement [10]. The ratifying parties are entitled to submit pledges called nationally determined contributions (NDC) for reducing GHG emissions and renew them every five years [10]. Despite this, the current global measures are insufficient to slow the warming to the +1.5 °C threshold, so more effort is needed for climate diplomacy to overcome numerous obstacles hindering the path to carbon neutrality.

The grounds for environmental diplomacy were laid during the UN Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, the UN's first summit on environmental issues [11]. This conference marked the emergence of global environmental governance, embodied in a series of major conferences, multilateral agreements and institutions [11]. However, the term 'environmental diplomacy' or 'environmental foreign policy', as the process of international negotiations in addressing environmental issues, did not appear in scientific studies until the early 1980s and became discussed more often in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War [11]–[13].

Climate diplomacy is a branch of environmental diplomacy which focuses on addressing climate change. Climate diplomacy is the practice and process of establishing the international climate change regime and ensuring its effective operation [14]. The inception of the annual climate change conferences dates back to 1992, when the Rio Summit, sometimes called the Earth Summit, was organised, and which culminated in the drafting of the UNFCCC, a multilateral environmental agreement that paved the way for the annual climate change summit format [15]. However, the first negotiations for establishing the UNFCCC began in December 1990 [14]. The UNFCCC was signed in 1992 by most countries, including Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and entered into force on 21 March 1994. The Estonian Parliament ratified the UNFCCC already in 1994 [16]. As a result, Estonia participated in the first COP1 as a fully-fledged Party, while Latvia and Lithuania sent their delegates to the COP1 as Observers. However, since the COP2 onwards, all three countries participated as fully fledged Parties [17].

All three Baltic States must play an individual role in global decarbonisation, although they are members of the European Union negotiating group [18] and their climate policy is shaped by the joint EU policy, most notably the European Green Deal policy initiatives, supported by the European Climate Law [19]. However, even though each EU member can instrument its own National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), international and national legal frameworks are not being equitably implemented across all EU countries, with some EU states showing little effort or even being counterproductive, while others are pushing for more ambitious goals to narrow the gap between the current trend and the targets of the Green Deal and Paris Agreement [20]–[21]. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia share many geopolitical similarities, as they are all located in Northern Europe, are members of the EU and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and are frequently grouped as the three Baltic States. All three countries are decarbonising their energy sector

by replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources (RES), aiming for 100 % of the generated electricity to come from RES by 2030 [22]–[23]. Reaching this goal will be challenging due to an expected increase in electricity demand in the future, resulting from the electrification of the economy. The growth is expected to be particularly sharp in Estonia and Lithuania, which have set explicit targets for hydrogen production via electrolysis [24]. All three countries are also among over 120 countries that have pledged to reach carbon neutrality by 2050 at the latest [25]. In addition, the Baltic states are all signatories to the Kyoto Protocol and its Doha Amendment (extension), as well as ratifiers of the Paris Agreement [10]. However, there are also significant differences, such as different levels of dependence on fossil fuels and carbon-intensive energy imports. Furthermore, there have been missed opportunities for closer alignment in the energy sector between the three countries, particularly Lithuania, despite sharing energy infrastructure, including the Klaipėda LNG terminal and energy links with Sweden, as well as renewable energy deployment strategies. Examples of a lack of cooperation include the absence of a joint offshore wind power farm project as of 2025, proposed different timelines for disconnection from the BRELL ring, and differing positions regarding electricity from the Ostrovets Nuclear Power Plant in recent years [26]–[28].

COP participation records, with indicated national delegation size (NDS) and high-level segment national statements, help document the climate change negotiations process and the level of ambition of each member of the UNFCCC [21], [29]. Notwithstanding 198 parties which have ratified the UNFCCC, only a tiny share of them, typically the more prominent countries, receive attention, even though each participates in annual climate change conferences. This study opens a window to the climate diplomacy of the Baltic States, which still have the potential to become exemplary models in the decarbonisation race over the upcoming decade. Although the most considerable potential for implementing more ambitious climate diplomacy goals lies in China and the US, as these countries are responsible for almost 40 % of the GHG emissions, climate change diplomacy also allows smaller countries to influence the global agenda [30]. Some mid-sized and small countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Costa Rica, have been frequently cited for their successful and ambitious climate policies in the energy sector, including the penetration of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency [31]. Another often mentioned country is Bhutan, which has proactively engaged in climate diplomacy despite its small size and is one of the few countries that remain carbon neutral [30]. Environmental diplomacy can be used as a soft power instrument, as the climate change agenda has become an essential component of foreign policymaking [32]. In addition, Tshering and Craft argue that active and progressive climate diplomacy may safeguard and promote the national interests of small countries [30].

Until now, no study has been conducted on the involvement of the Baltic states in climate diplomacy, despite the existence of studies on various forms of environmental diplomacy and reports assessing the general performance of each country. The survey by Kleinberga *et al*. [33], which includes an insight into Latvian climate diplomacy, concludes that Latvia has been barely visible in the EU climate and environmental debate and follows a pragmatic narrative at the official political level. The study by Sabūnas [22] estimated the efforts of Latvia and Lithuania in reaching carbon neutrality and found an ambition gap for the 2030 goal but does not analyse their diplomatic stance. Similarly, the study by Volkova *et al*. [34] assesses the potential of Estonia to reach carbon neutrality by 2040 but focuses on internal policies. Finally, the study by Kalnbalkite *et al*. [35] examines the environmental diplomacy of Latvia, with a focus on fisheries and aquaculture and raising public awareness about this issue. In general, the environmental diplomacy of more prominent state actors is more frequently researched. Multiple studies on the climate diplomacy of the EU, France, China,

and Japan have been conducted, among others [36]–[38]. On the other hand, the studies on climate diplomacy through the COP format are scarcer. *CarbonBrief*, a UK-based website, tracks attendance records from COP conferences and presents them in graphics [39]. Another noteworthy and detailed analysis on a smaller scale was done by Skovgaard and Gallant [40], who analysed the composition of NDS of twelve different countries in five COPs. This study observed that, despite increases in delegation size and diversity of profiles, delegations were still dominated by the same key ministries in almost all screened countries, primarily the Ministry of Environment or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [40]. Until COP19, the Ministry of Environment dominated most delegations [40]. Still, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dominated the delegations of the US and Brazil, and the Ministry of Economy (National Development and Reform Commission) prevailed in China [40]. It also pointed to more diverse delegations during more important COPs, such as COP15 in Copenhagen [40].

NDS may vary due to multiple reasons. The analysis by Kaya and Schofield [41] (2020), which centred on COP attendance between 1995 and 2015, concluded that the presence of interest groups is more important than the demands from civil society or bureaucratic influence in determining the size of the NDS. It also noted that the distance can serve as a deterrent to larger delegations. Furthermore, financial capacity also plays a role as well [41]. Kaya and Schofield [41] also distinguish explanatory factors of involvement in such international negotiations, including the level of green international politics, economic interest, and climate change vulnerability; the latter alone does not influence the NDS. The potential mechanisms include pressure from civil society, green bureaucracy, and interest group politics. Additionally, limited resources can often have a negative impact on the NDS [41]. However, although COP is a tribune for smaller countries to engage in climate diplomacy and be heard, the conferences are frequently criticised for ineffectiveness due to their limited mandate and structure [42]. Even after the most recent conference, COP29, the issue of adequate climate finance remains unresolved, and the necessity of phasing out fossil fuels is not mentioned in any of the COP texts [43]. Instead, the COP26 text mentions “unabated coal” and fossil fuel subsidies, while the COP28 text outlines a roadmap to “transition away” from fossil fuels [44].

The primary objective of this study is to compare the climate diplomacy efforts of the three Baltic States, based on their participation records at the COP and national statements. The analysis of NDS is compared with the actual situation, energy transition plans, and the involvement (or a lack thereof) in advocating for swifter climate action. Diplomacy through climate finance is also assessed based on the available data on external action. This study may help understand what three Baltic countries can do better to ensure their climate diplomacy brings about positive change and is recognised as credible and effective.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative analysis to assess and compare the ambitions of the Baltic States in the context of the global efforts to mitigate climate change. Since climate diplomacy assessment does not have a single established method, this study develops a method based on four areas that constitute diplomatic actions to better evaluate countries' involvement. The first of these, the formal engagement of different stakeholders, is used for assessing participation in each country. Since climate policy can serve as a soft power instrument [32], its potential is evaluated by assessing its visibility and positioning. Lastly, an outcome-based evaluation may be conducted thanks to the external action (aid) (Fig. 1), and Table 1 describes how the data was obtained.

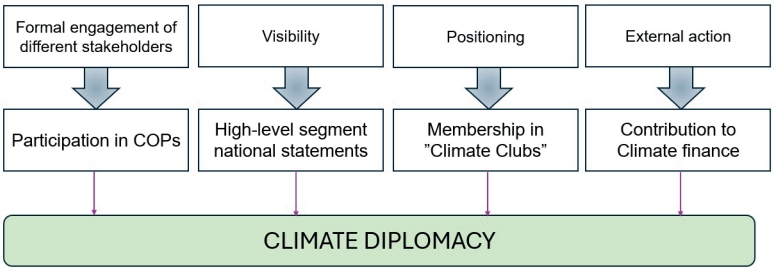

Fig. 1. The graph illustrates four components analysed to assess climate diplomacy.

For assessing the first two components, i.e., quantifying the national NDS, the UN database, which includes a list of participants, is utilised, and the lists for selected countries are manually extracted. Furthermore, the taxonomy is modified to reflect the involvement of various stakeholders in the climate change negotiation process. The original documents categorise all participants into the following groups: Party, Party Overflow, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Global Climate Action, Conference invitees, host country guests, media, and other categories. This study employs the following terminology: Government and agencies (incl. heads of state, if applicable), Diplomatic Missions, Research and Academia, Businesses (private sector), Civil Society, Municipality Representatives, Media, and Others (primarily for host country guests).

The second element, the visibility of climate actions in the global arena, is evaluated using the same UN database (Fig. 1). To find the required papers, various keywords are utilised as shown in Table 1. Simple framing analysis and debriefing of 30-year-long records of high-level segment national statements, typically delivered by the head of the delegation and stored in the UNFCCC Digital Archive [45]. In addition to the number of submissions by country, the content of each of them is analysed: how ambitious each country positions itself according to the statement, whether they unequivocally support phasing out fossil fuels, which is required to go in line with the principal goal of the Paris Agreement, not to exceed the 1.5 °C warming threshold above pre-industrial levels. Specific keywords are extracted and compared between the statements, including carbon neutrality pledges, the promotion or opposition of fossil fuels, and reminders not to exceed the 1.5 °C threshold.

The third component of the scheme is positioning. It enables assessing the ambition of climate diplomacy more accurately through alliances advocating for quicker decarbonisation, known as the *Climate Clubs* (Fig. 1, Table 1). *Climate Clubs* are intergovernmental forums or coalitions with higher ambitions in climate action.

TABLE 1. SOURCES USED FOR EVALUATING CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

	Method	**Sources**
Participation in COPs	NDS and sectoral diversity	UNFCCC database, keyword "list of participants" [17]
High-level segment national statements	Content and frequency analysis of the statements	Digital archive of the UNFCCC, keyword "high-level segment" [45]
Membership in *Climate Club*s	Participation in "Climate Clubs"	Websites of the corresponding Clubs [46]–[50]
Contribution to climate finance	Estimating the environment-related official development aid (ODA)	Contributions to the Green Climate Fund and the ODA [51]–[52]

Falkner *et al*. categorise the clubs into three categories, based on legal strength: normative clubs, bargaining clubs, and transformational clubs [53]. This study examines one of the most well-known and ambitious coalitions and whether the Baltic States are members of such alliances.

The degree to which a nation participates in external action—that is, aiding developing nations in their attempts at adaptation and mitigation—is the fourth factor (Fig. 1). The scope of climate-friendly development assistance is compared based on available data, see Table 1.

In addition to the four outlined components, the official international position is compared with the actual legislation, domestic policies, and decarbonisation trends.

3. RESULTS

3.1. What Can the History of Participation Tell us about Each Country?

The involvement of various ministries may facilitate climate change mitigation policies and diplomacy. Before COP28, the average NDS of all three countries was similar, with Estonia lagging behind Latvia and Lithuania (Fig. 2). Latvia is also more consistent with the number of attending delegates – the smallest delegation consisted of two representatives (COP2 in Geneva), while the biggest one consisted of 43 (COP28 in Dubai, Fig. 2(b)). Meanwhile, the fluctuation for Estonia was between one (COP7 in Marrakech) and 143 (COP28, Fig. 2(a)). The Lithuanian NDS is also known for its steeper fluctuations, ranging from one (COP5 in Bonn, COP7, COP8 in New Delhi, COP9 in Milan) to 39 (COP19 in Warsaw, Fig. 2(c)). Estonia has sent the highest number of delegates to the COP in total (404, ranking 128th among all participating countries), followed by Latvia (347, ranking 140th) and Lithuania (337, ranking 143rd). There was a significant increase in NDS starting from COP15 in Copenhagen. However, in the case of Lithuania, geographic proximity played an even more substantial role in the NDS than the importance of the conference, as seen in the record-high number of attendees at COP19 in Warsaw, Poland. Paradoxically, GDP and population size showed no positive correlation with NDS among the Baltic States, as the smallest economy typically sent the largest delegation on average, and vice versa. The Parties, or government officials, dominated the delegations. From 67.7 % in Estonia, 79.7 % in Latvia, to 87.8 % in Lithuania, where the total number of Parties was the highest among the Baltic States (Fig. 2). Businesses and Research fields were represented in Estonian delegations the most (17.4 % and 12.4 % of the total NDS, respectively). At the same time, in the Latvian case, the civil society was more involved (6.8 % of the total delegation). However, in the Lithuanian case, all these groups accounted for less than 3.5 %. The delegations from municipalities and city councils also accounted for less than 4 % of the final delegation, with no representatives at all in the Lithuanian delegations. In contrast, 11 representatives from Tallinn, the Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities, Järvakandi, and Kuressaare attended, and three representatives from the Riga City Council participated in the conferences (Fig. 2).

It is unclear why such different compositions exist in the delegations between the three countries. Historically, all three countries did not have as good opportunities as their Western European counterparts to send large, diverse delegations due to economic reasons. Another reason is that to date, only Estonia has built a pavilion representing its positive developments, attracting many participants from non-governmental sectors. Although the COPs coincided with elections and changes in government a few times in Latvia and Lithuania (but only once in Estonia), there is no apparent connection between the NDS and a period of political instability.

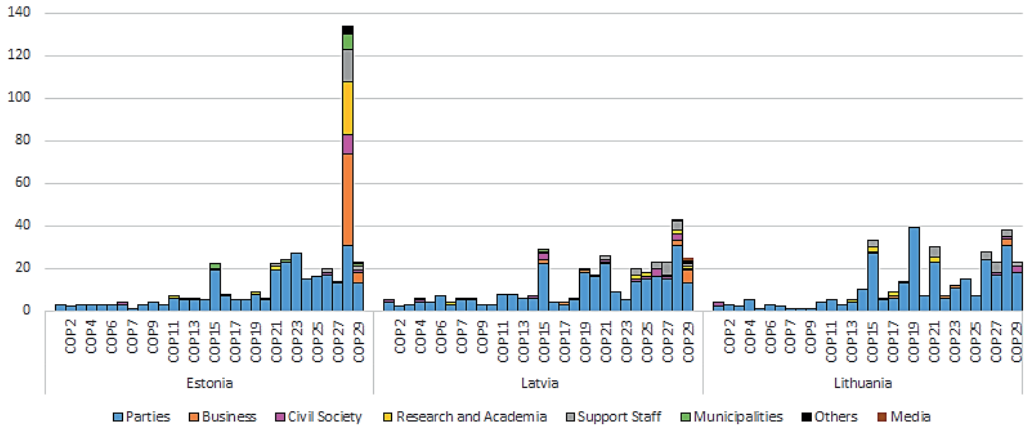

Fig. 2. Registered participants in country delegations by affiliation throughout the COP conferences.

Government representatives from corresponding countries at the COP were dominated by ministries responsible for the environment. The present Ministry of Climate or the former Ministry of Environment in Estonia accounted for over three-quarters of all government personnel, while the analogous ministries in Latvia and Lithuania accounted for well over half (Fig. 3).

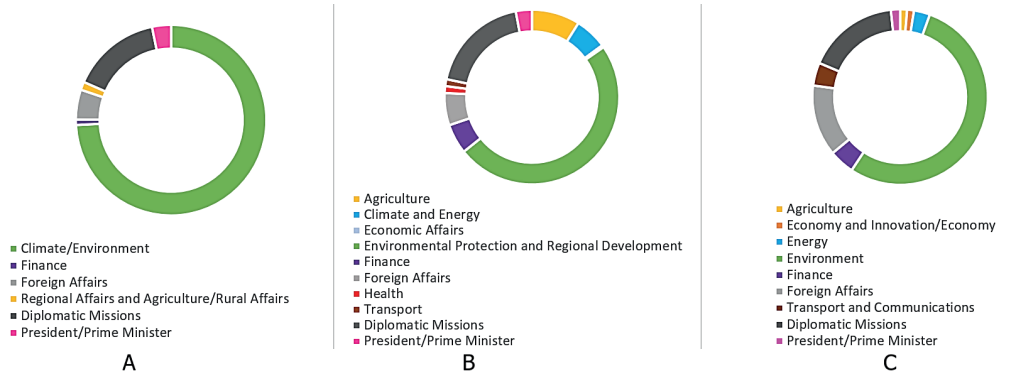

Fig. 3. Parties and Party Overflow composition throughout the COP conferences (COP1 to COP29). Share of involved ministry or diplomatic mission by country: a) Estonia, b) Latvia, c) Lithuania.

Latvia involved diplomatic missions (embassies and consulates) most (3 diplomats per 2 COP on average), a similar number as in the case of Lithuania. Latvia was the only country among the three to have honorary consulates in its delegations. Meanwhile, Estonia began involving its diplomatic missions only from COP11 onwards, and Lithuania has sent more government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs than the combined delegations from Latvia and Estonia. Four ministries have been involved in the national COP delegations for Estonia. At the same time, Latvian and Lithuanian government officials included seven, not counting the newly created Ministry of Climate and Energy, separately.

The second main element of climate diplomacy, visibility, is then examined. Every Baltic state's national statement is analysed, debriefed, and similar patterns are found.

3.1.1. Estonia

The Estonian debut was quite enthusiastic, as the country's Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment attended the first session, a very unusual case before COP3 in Kyoto. Estonia also boasted of having passed the Act of Sustainable Development, which it referred to as "perhaps the only one in the world," during its statement at COP1. However, the second statement two years later was more docile, and Estonia admitted its concerns about the emission trading system (ETS). It also referred to the financial support from the "Nordic neighbours".

Despite the initial enthusiasm, Estonia took a more passive role and did not issue any statements between COP4 and COP12, even though a minister headed the delegations between COP5 and COP6-2. COP10 was also attended by a minister, but the statements resumed starting only from COP13. The Estonian statement for COP13 was more general and did not include explicit promises. Instead, they vaguely mentioned environmentally friendly technologies. However, Estonia also highlighted its significant reduction in GHG emissions since 1990, emphasising the role of energy efficiency. In its COP15 statement, the Estonian delegation prepared a concise statement, listing three points needed for the "Copenhagen Deal" and an allusion to a conditional pledge if "others make comparable efforts".

Between COP15 in Copenhagen and COP21 in Paris, the stance of Estonia shifted from the most passive to the most active one. Even though the Estonian delegation remained the smallest among the Baltic States, it was headed by the Minister of Environment between COP16 and COP20, and the Prime Minister for COP21. Each time, a high-level national segment statement was prepared. In its six statements, Estonia emphasised that it "invested 400 million euros" in climate mitigation projects, equivalent to 2 % of its GDP at the time. It also boasted of having organised "the first Nordic-Baltic climate change conference" in 2013 and repeatedly quoted its success in cutting GHG emissions [45]. However, despite the active participation, Estonia would mention its role as an EU country, which neither blocks the ambition nor pushes for bigger goals. One clear distinction in the Estonian statement at COP21 was the mention of the budget savings in the country due to digitalisation. Estonia admitted using a large amount of oil shale but promised to "rethink" its use.

From COP22 onwards, Estonia's lead in climate change diplomacy became even more apparent compared to other Baltic States, showing that relatively small countries can contribute to solving "the climate crisis", as Estonian Prime Minister Kallas noted in 2023 [45]. Despite positioning itself more as a country that approves of and willingly fulfils the EU's ambitions, Estonia emerged as an ambitious actor, showcasing its positive developments in its pavilion for COP28 [54]. Among other spheres that shed a positive light on Estonia was the Green Tech Pledge, signed by Estonian technology companies, to become carbon neutral by 2030, and the mention of the "World Cleanup Day", a term coined by Estonia. Estonia also noted that it launched "Data for the Environment Alliance" to improve "digital skills in energy efficiency" [45]. In COP26, PM Kallas pledged to stop oil shale in electricity by 2035 and shale-based energy by 2040. In her statement during the COP28, PM Kallas voiced her support of the paradigm to "keep the 1.5 ℃ scenario alive", becoming the second representative from the Baltic States to show her support for the 1.5 ℃ scenario. In line with the most recent findings by the International Energy Agency (IEA) at that time, she mentioned that the world needs to triple RES by 2030 and that her country is projected to exceed it, as Estonia had set the electricity target of 100 % and to phase out fossil fuels. The latter points were reiterated in the most recent statement from 2024. In her statement at COP28, PM Kallas underlined Estonia's contribution to the Green Climate Fund [45].

3.1.2. Latvia

Meanwhile, in its first statement, Latvia referred to its painful "totalitarian legacy", which created "ineffective and inefficient sectors". The representative also referred to the "Latvian Environmental Protection Policy Plan" and "A Tax on Natural Resources," and expressed his concerns that Latvia would not be able to specify deductions in emissions by 2010. Latvia was the most straightforward about the role of financial aid in its climate policies in the 1990s. This was mentioned in the first two statements.

The year when COP5 was held was tough for Latvia due to the economic recession. Despite its financial condition and preparations for EU accession, Latvia became relatively more involved and stood out positively compared to its two passive neighbours. Latvia prepared two statements for COP6 and COP7. It showcased the progress in GHG reduction, expressed appreciation for the Bonn Agreement, and demonstrated its willingness to commit to the increased 8 % reduction goal for the Kyoto Protocol. Latvia also voiced support for small-scale JI projects and the International Emission Trading (IET) scheme introduced by the Kyoto Protocol. The statements mentioned the launch of the Prototype Carbon Fund in Liepāja, including improvements in waste management, the establishment of the Environment Agency of Latvia, and the National Climate Change Policy adopted in 1998. However, Latvia made it clear that as a developing country, it needed financial support for innovations.

In its later statements, Latvia backed the JI and IET mechanisms. Latvia issued its statements during COP14 and COP15. Latvia mentioned its Green Investment Scheme and noted that investment in both mitigation and adaptation was needed. It also emphasised the necessity of finding a balance between agricultural land use, forestry land use, and land use for biomass, joining the discussion that was very actively ongoing at that time [45]. In its subsequent statement, Latvia presented itself as a successful example, citing a significant share of the renewable energy sector and substantial reductions in emissions since 1990. It also boasted about its carbon sinks (which would turn into net carbon emitters in the late 2010s) and its intention not to increase GHG emissions by 2020. Latvian representatives also referred to the IPCC recommendation to further increase reductions.

Between COP16 and COP18, Latvia did not issue any statements, and its delegations were both small in number and lacked high-ranking officials, which may be attributable to the effects of the Great Recession. In its statement for COP19, the Latvian minister recognised climate change as "the biggest challenge humanity has ever faced" [45]. He reassured that Latvia will remain committed to mitigation despite the recent economic crisis. Some positive results were also presented, including the implementation of over 2 000 projects aimed at reducing GHG emissions. In the following statement, the Minister attempted to portray Latvia as an actively committed country that agrees to a 40 % reduction in the EU by 2030 and is convinced to pledge to the Green Climate Fund. A vague statement for COP21 followed. However, a lack of detail for COP21 can be justified by the limited time given to each delegation.

Out of the four high-level statements prepared by Latvia between COP22 and COP29, two were delivered by the country's presidents. The Latvian statement at COP26 was the first to mention the need to limit global warming to 1.5 °C. It also noted the need to "decrease the reliance" on fossil fuels, somewhat comparable to the later statement by the president of Lithuania that fossil fuels need to be transitioned away (Table 2). These are less ambitious than the clear statement by Estonia in COP28. Latvia has advocated for its commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 (Table 2).

3.1.3. Lithuania

In its first national statement, the head of the Lithuanian delegation made general remarks but mentioned Lithuanian ambitions in developing hydroelectricity, biogas, and geothermal energy (the latter was later halted). Like his Estonian colleague, he expressed scepticism about the ETS but backed the initial joint implementation (JI) reduction targets –7.5 % at that time. The second statement at COP4 was less ambitious in tone despite noting a significant reduction in GHG emissions since 1990, a common leitmotif in the statements of all three countries. The Lithuanian Minister thanked Denmark and Norway for their assistance and expressed his concern that the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant would be closed in the future.

At the time of COP5, Lithuania was also struck by the economic recession. No high-ranking officials were sent, and no statements were issued between COP5 and COP10. Lithuania joined Latvia by expressing its support for the JI and IET mechanisms. It also expressed its support for new post-2012 Kyoto Protocol targets and mentioned biomass, wind energy, biofuel, afforestation, and energy efficiency as the means to reach them. It also noted the need for all countries to be "on board", pointing out the sharp cut in GHG emissions since 1990 in a similar manner to Latvia.

Lithuanian engagement was also affected by the Great Recession, but the Lithuanian delegations were the largest among the Baltic States between COP16 and COP20. Lithuania issued only one statement for COP20, the first one since COP13. In the statement, Lithuania presented itself as a country that reduced emissions "by 56 %" despite its economic growth. It also mentioned that the National Low Carbon Development and Adaptation Strategy and Its Implementation Act was adopted, and a Special Climate Change Program with a USD 120 million budget was established. Other positive developments include the annual improvement in energy efficiency through the modernisation of buildings and a 23 % share of RES in total energy consumption. Lithuania intended to position itself as a frontrunner by arguing for a legally binding target in the future agreement. At COP21, the president of Lithuania issued a statement, but the text has not been uploaded to the archives [45].

Between COP22 and COP29, the Lithuanian delegation presented national statements every year, unlike Latvia and Estonia. Similarly to Estonia, Lithuania presented itself as a country that fully supports the EU's pledge and is jointly committed to it. Its representative testified that "no contradiction between environmental protection and economic growth" exists. The statement also declared its support of the Paris Agreement during COP22, which was still not ratified by the Lithuanian Parliament at that time. Two statements also portrayed Lithuania as a successful example of decarbonisation due to a significant decrease in emissions since 1990 and mentioned that the country's climate change policy is enshrined in its strategy. They also encouraged closer regional cooperation between the Baltic States. However, Lithuanian President Nausėda also mentioned fossil fuels (LNG terminal) as a positive development for "energy independence", making Lithuania the only Baltic state which has spoken in favour of fossil fuels after COP3 (Table 2).

3.1.4. How do the Baltic states compare with each other?

Based on the number of released statements and their contents, the history of climate diplomacy of the Baltic states can be divided into five periods:

- Careful enthusiasm and the first steps of climate diplomacy between COP1 and COP3. The common point between all three countries initially was dire economic conditions, which worsened again during the 1999 crisis. This was reflected in the statements, but Estonia took a clear lead in the initial years.

- Different stances between COP4 and COP9 when the three countries were waiting for EU membership, and the Kyoto Protocol's implementation rules were discussed.
- The period between COP10 and COP15 in Copenhagen, where a new climate deal was awaited.
- High hopes for a breakthrough after unsuccessful negotiations in Copenhagen, with a new agreement at COP21 in Paris.
- The post-Paris agreement period is characterised by the involvement of each of the three countries and the emergence of Estonia.

Lithuania and Latvia have issued a similar number of high-level segment national statements (14 and 13, respectively), fewer than Estonia (15) [52]. However, no country was consistently proactive. Only the Latvian and Estonian delegations made statements during the first COP, while the Lithuanian delegation made its first statement in Kyoto at COP3. However, despite showing enthusiasm during the first COP meetings, Estonia did not issue national statements for ten consecutive summits between COP4 in 1998 and COP12 in 2006. In contrast, the period for no issued statements was shorter for Lithuania (seven successive summits at most) and Latvia (six summits).

TABLE 2. CLIMATE POLICY AND ITS REFLECTION IN THE NATIONAL STATEMENTS

	Estonia	**Latvia**	**Lithuania**
Mentioning the climate neutrality pledge [45]	Yes, COP25 (2019)	Yes, COP28 (2023)	Yes, COP25 (2019)
Last promotion of fossil fuels in statements [45]	Peat (COP3, 1997)	None	Liquefied natural gas (COP28)
Mentioning the "1.5 °C" in the statement [45]	COP28	COP26 (2021)	COP29 (2024)
Supporting the phase-out of fossil fuels in the statement [45]	Yes, COP28; oil shale is criticised multiple times	Partly, COP26: "Decrease the reliance"	Partly, COP29: "Transitioning away"

All three countries can be cited as positive examples that demonstrate how rapid economic growth can be combined with a significant decrease in GHG emissions. As seen in Table 2 and the analysis above, all three countries align themselves with EU policies but rarely position themselves as more committed than the average EU member state in their statements. One classical example is the ratification of the Paris Agreement. While the Estonian Parliament followed the EU's footsteps quickly, ratifying the Agreement on November 4, 2016, i.e., less than a month before it entered into force, the Lithuanian and Latvian Parliaments ratified the agreement the following year, on February 2 and March 16, respectively [10].

3.2. The Allies in Climate Diplomacy

Lithuania and Latvia remain passive in joining the so-called 'climate clubs', country groups requesting more rigorous pledges on a specific policy area [53]. For instance, even though the EU joined the Global Methane Pledge group formed in COP26, which calls for "drastic methane emissions reductions", only Estonia has joined the pledge. Meanwhile, Latvia and Lithuania are two of the four EU member states that have not joined it as of September 2025 [46]. All three countries are a part of the Powering Past Coal Alliance, initiated by Canada and the UK at COP23, which advocates phasing out coal [48], and the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action [49]. However, none of the three are members or supporters of the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance (BOGA), a climate club advocating for the phase-out of oil

and natural gas, launched by Denmark and Costa Rica at COP26. This club is one of the most ambitious 'climate clubs' and has 15 core members, two associate members, and seven "friends of BOGA" as of September 2025 [47]. The Baltic states are not a part of the Carbon Neutrality Coalition either [50].

Despite pledging carbon neutrality by 2050, in 2019, the Lithuanian government was counterproductive by advocating for broader investment in natural gas, thereby opposing the phasing out of fossil fuels as part of the *energy transition*, along with seven other EU countries [55]. Neither Latvia nor Estonia joined this motion [55]. In turn, Estonia opposed the carbon neutrality pledge as late as June 2019, joining Czechia, Hungary, and Poland. However, Estonia changed its position differently from Poland and Czechia, which still do not have a carbon neutrality pledge as of 2025 [56].

3.3. Aid Policies

Estonia deserves the title of the most generous country in terms of climate finance among the three Baltic states. This was also reflected in its COP statements, which mentioned projects in Bhutan and Afghanistan twice [45]. Estonia signed the contribution agreement with the Green Climate Fund Trust Fund in 2015 and offered the highest amount as a grant contribution [52]. It is the only Baltic state to have signed an amendment to the agreement in 2024 [52]. Meanwhile, the contributions from Latvia and Lithuania were signed in 2014 and 2016 and were far lower than the amount from Estonia [52]. As of 2025, it stands as:

- Estonia (1.14 MEUR or 1.34 MUSD);
- Latvia (0.4 MEUR or 0.47 MUSD);
- Lithuania (0.11 MEUR or 0.13 MUSD).

As of 2024, Lithuania remained the most generous Baltic state in its Official Development Assistance (ODA), which spends 164 MEUR (193 MUSD), or 0.24 % of its GNI on ODA, ahead of Latvia (95 MEUR (112 MUSD), or 0.36 %) and Estonia (71 MEUR (83 MUSD), or 0.20 %) [51]. However, it remains unclear what percentage of this sum goes to climate-related projects.

3.4. Do They Practice What They Preach? Frontrunners, Passive Bystanders or Obstructionists to More Ambitious Goals

All three Baltic States have been recognised for their largely successful efforts to increase the RES significantly. As of 2023, Lithuania had the second-largest share and the second-highest percentage increase of wind energy in the EU's electricity mix and was working on increasing solar capacity to generate all electricity from renewable sources by 2030 [57]. Meanwhile, the growth of wind power in Latvia was the fourth fastest in the EU [57]. Recently, Lithuania held its first auction on the offshore wind park, albeit without success, and Latvia announced a potential increase in its first offshore wind farm capacity, ELWIND [57]–[58]. In 2019, Lithuania introduced a digital platform that enables purchasing or renting parts of a remote solar park, the first such platform in the world to operate nationally [59]. The share of electricity generated from solar power in Lithuania increased from 3 % to 19 % in five years, one of the fastest rates among EU countries [57].

Despite its smaller size, Estonia has been even more successful in implementing PV expansion, producing a similar amount of electricity from PV. As of 2022, it ranked sixth among EU countries in terms of installed capacity per capita. Latvia leads the share of energy from renewable sources among the Baltic States: in 2023, its share was the fourth largest, after Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, despite having one of the lowest installed capacities of wind and solar farms in the EU. Estonia ranks fifth, while Lithuania ranks eighth, above the

EU average (Table 3) [60]. A high level of dependency on energy imports overshadows Lithuanian efforts.

Even though GHG emissions have been declining since the peak in 1991, and reductions from the energy generation sector are considerable, the 2030 reduction pledge of the Baltic States, particularly Latvia and Lithuania, is among the most modest within the EU (Table 3).

TABLE 3. CLIMATE POLICY AND ITS REFLECTION IN PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

	Estonia	**Latvia**	**Lithuania**
RES in total energy consumption (2023) [61]	41.0 %	43.2 %	31.9 %
2030 reduction pledge [22]	−24 %	−17 %	−21 %
GHG emissions per capita, 2015–2022, t CO_2eq [62]	12.3 (excl. LULUCF) 13.6 (incl. LULUCF)	5.6 (excl. LULUCF) 5.7 (incl. LULUCF)	7.1 (excl. LULUCF) 4.8 (incl. LULUCF)
Climate neutrality pledge (endorsement)	October 2019 (25th in the EU-28) [56]	May 2019 [63]	June 2019 (23rd in the EU-28) [64]
Net zero pledge [65]	Political pledge only (January 2021)	Policy document (December 2019)	Policy document (November 2021)

In addition, although GHG emissions per capita in Latvia and Lithuania are below the EU average of 7.5–8.1, their levels remained similar during the post-Paris Agreement period due to a decrease in population (Table 3) [62]. Meanwhile, Estonia still has the second- or third-highest GHG emissions per capita in the EU, depending on the calculation methodology (Fig. 2) [61]–[62].

All these countries have a carbon neutrality pledge; however, it is not legally binding in Latvia and Lithuania, while Estonia has not even translated its political pledge into a policy document [65]. Meanwhile, Latvia prepared its carbon neutrality policy as early as December 2019, releasing the Strategy to Achieve Climate Neutrality by 2050. This was followed by Lithuania, which released its Long-term Strategy in November 2021.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The study finds that although no Baltic State stands out as a frontrunner in climate action in the world, and there is no clear leader among the three, Estonia has emerged as more outspoken in the international arena since COP26 in Glasgow, despite a lack of consistency in its climate change policies in the recent past. The records of attendance and high-level statements, as well as the early participation of high-profile officials, demonstrate that there was more Estonian involvement in the earliest stages of climate diplomacy. Meanwhile, Latvia and Lithuania can be considered more as bystanders, despite outscoring Estonia in terms of low-carbon energy share and having a lower carbon footprint. At COP28, Estonia became the first and, to date, the only Baltic State to have built its pavilion to present itself as “a consistent advocate for environmental stewardship and climate action” [54]. It has also successfully positioned itself as a hub of modern technology and digitalisation. Estonia and Latvia have involved various stakeholders other than the government representatives in the climate negotiation process. The presence of academicians and researchers in COPs is more pronounced in Estonian delegations. In contrast, Latvia stands out for having the highest share of members of civil society among the three countries. Meanwhile, the size of Parties (government and its agencies, thus government officials) is the biggest in Lithuania;

Lithuanian and Latvian delegations tend to be the most diverse at the ministerial level – seven ministries have sent their delegates to the COPs, which may signify that the political involvement is not limited to the ministry in charge of environmental protection and energy. However, none of the three have joined the most ambitious *Climate clubs*. Despite maintaining a low profile in climate diplomacy, Latvia fares better than the other two Baltic states in terms of carbon intensity and renewable energy penetration. Furthermore, its environmental diplomacy is less affected by internal politics than in the cases of Lithuania and Estonia. Meanwhile, the official positions of Estonia and Lithuania were sometimes slowing down the decarbonisation process within the EU. However, the common weakness of the Baltic States was their low cuts in GHG emissions from sectors other than electricity and heat [66]. A lack of uniformity in the transition to carbon neutrality across different sectors was also highlighted in the study by Janeliūnas [67].

Although a deeper historical analysis and the possible role of interest groups are outside the scope of this research, it is crucial to note that, despite their proximity, all three countries had very different starting positions in the early 1990s, and some of these differences persist to this day. Estonia was one of the most CO_2-intensive countries in the world, second only to Luxembourg on the European continent, primarily due to its enormous share of shale oil in the energy mix and inefficient energy consumption. Estonian representatives acknowledged this fact on several occasions during their statements at COP. Even though GHG emissions dropped significantly by 1992, Estonia remains one of the most carbon-intensive economies in the EU. Meanwhile, emissions in Latvia were not exceptional in Europe, as renewable energy, most notably hydropower, has had a significant share in the energy mix. In the case of Lithuania, CO_2 intensity was lower than in Estonia but higher than in Latvia, as, despite a low share of renewable energy, nuclear power supplied a significant part of the generated electricity.

Future studies may consider the role of different actors and factors in shaping each country's strategies and national delegation structure in COPs, such as the impact of internal politics, the influence of various ministries, and their interactions with one another. Comparing the keywords used in national statements with those of other EU countries could better position the three Baltic states on a relative scale, ranging from obstructionist to frontrunner. In addition, incorporating data on statements about climate change from high-level officials (Presidents and Prime Ministers) of the Baltic states outside of COPs could help better compare which countries were emerging and which ones were laggards at different times. Similarly, a more interdisciplinary approach to NGOs and media/art could help us better understand the constructed *green* identity of each country. In addition, more comprehensive data on climate change-related official development assistance could help us assess the external actions of each country more accurately, given the importance of climate finance for developing countries at recent COPs. However, the assessment is complicated by the fact that Estonia and Lithuania are recent members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), while Latvia is not yet a member.

The analysis of this study, based on formal engagement, visibility, positioning, and external action, concludes that although there is no clear leader among the Baltic States and all three countries tend to be bystanders in climate diplomacy, Estonia was the most involved in the first summit and the most recent summits. In the meanwhile, Lithuania's ambiguous position on natural gas, the lack of local municipalities' participation in climate diplomacy, and a low share of NGO and researcher involvement make it arguably the most passive in climate diplomacy among the three Baltic States, despite its active participation in preparing national statements for the high-level segment. Actions where Estonia demonstrated its leadership in green politics, in addition to the pavilion at COP28, include the Green Pledge signed by

Estonian technology companies at the Tallinn Digital Summit and the founding of World Cleanup Day. Estonia is also known worldwide for its IT sector and digitalisation; in one of its recent COP statements, an Estonian representative mentioned that "IT companies have great capabilities" in developing green and smart technologies [45]. Latvia has earned an image as a green country due to its high forest cover rate. This study found that Latvian civil society is more prominent in terms of participation than its Lithuanian and Estonian counterparts. Latvian President Raimonds Vējonis is often referred to as the EU's first Green President [68]. Latvia hosted the scoping meeting for the Special Report of the IPCC 7th Assessment Report (AR7) in Riga. Lithuania temporarily garnered positive media attention due to the significant improvements in waste recycling [45], resulting from the introduction of the deposit refund system, as announced during COP24 [45], and the growth in installed wind and solar capacity [52]. Lithuania is the largest donor country for ODA, while Latvia spends the largest share of its GNI. However, considering the lack of consistency in each country's climate diplomacy history, none of them could be dubbed a regional frontrunner.

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