

THE CHANGING ROLES OF NATIONAL BORDERS IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEDERALIZATION AND NATION-STATE COOPERATION

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Abstract. *This paper examines the evolving role of national borders in the context of European integration, with a focus on the Western Balkans. It analyzes the multifaceted nature of sovereignty through geopolitical, cultural, military, and economic lenses. Case studies from Yugoslavia's dissolution, Bosnia and Herzegovina's challenges, and Romania's post-EU accession experience illustrate the complexities of regional integration. The research critiques indiscriminate liberalization and centralization policies, emphasizing the importance of national borders in maintaining societal sustainability and diversity. It argues for a nuanced approach to European integration that respects the principle of subsidiarity and allows for diverse national approaches within a broader framework of shared values. The paper concludes that the future of European integration lies in thoughtfully reconfiguring the roles of national borders to balance the benefits of integration with the preservation of national sovereignty and societal diversity.*

Keywords: *European integration, National sovereignty, Western Balkans, Federalization, Border politics*

1. Introduction

The Western Balkans region, comprising countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, represents one of Europe's most complex geopolitical landscapes. This complexity stems from a history characterized by brief periods of independence intercalated with longer durations of external rule, with the notable exceptions of Serbia and, to a lesser extent, Albania (Lampe, 2014). The current national borders in this region were largely determined following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, a process that precipitated the most severe military conflicts on the European continent since World War II.

Although armed hostilities officially ceased in 2001, the geopolitical situation in the Western Balkans remains tense, particularly noticeable in the ongoing disputes surrounding Kosovo and the complex political structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bieber, 2020). All countries in the region have attained EU candidate status, except for Kosovo which is considered a potential candidate, leading some politicians and academics to advocate for their rapid integration as a panacea for lingering disputes (Vachudova, 2014). However, this approach carries significant risks. Given the EU's lack of established mechanisms for managing internal geopolitical conflicts, especially those

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involving contested borders between member states, hasty integration could potentially precipitate an unprecedented crisis within the Union (Bechev, 2011).

This paper aims to critically analyze the concept of national borders, examining their multifaceted roles in maintaining functional societies within the specific context of the Western Balkans and the broader framework of European integration. Drawing on historical experiences from the region, we will evaluate the effects of federalization on nation-states and scrutinize the vision of a federalist construction at the European level.

Our analysis employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating insights from political science, international relations, and historical sociology. We draw on the work of scholars such as Charles Tilly on state formation (Tilly, 2017), Benedict Anderson on imagined communities (Anderson, 2020), and Dani Rodrik on the globalization trilemma (Rodrik, 2011). This theoretical framework allows us to explore the interplay between geopolitical factors, political and cultural convergence, military power, and economic viability in shaping the roles and significance of national borders.

By synthesizing these perspectives, this paper contributes to the ongoing debate on the future of European integration. It advocates for a nuanced approach that recognizes the enduring importance of national borders in fostering sustainable and diverse societies, even as it grapples with the need for transnational cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world.

2. The concept of national border

While the concept of national borders is frequently used in literature across various disciplines, comprehensive definitions that capture its full complexity are less common. We propose a definition that synthesizes multiple aspects of national borders. National borders are complex geo-political entities which act as zones of interaction and contestation (Agnew, 1994; Paasi, 1999; Tuathail & Toal, 1996), that delimit a geographical territory and a social space abstracted in a political organization called a state, characterized by its own power system (self-government), which has sovereignty over the establishment of internal social norms, international relations and the exploitation of state's resources (Agnew, 2005; Krasner, 1999). The process of the sovereign exercise of power determines the cultural construction of a national identity within national borders (Anderson, 2020; Donnan & Wilson, 2021). The borders and the states they delimit, alongside with the power centers that exerts sovereignty inside of them, have a certain dynamic in historical context. The concept of stability, regarding national borders, must be analyzed in these dynamic, historical contexts.

The above definition fits the various forms of political organization that have existed throughout history before the emergence of the nation state (city-states, kingdoms or empires). The nation-state can be considered the result of the political evolution of various forms of state in history, imposing itself as a dominant form of political organization starting with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which established the principle of territorial sovereignty that structured the European continent in the next centuries (Tilly, 2017), becoming the global form of political organization during the 20th century as the last vestiges of colonial empires disappeared. The term evolution is used here in a Hegelian sense, as the nation-state became the most stable and functional form of political organization which developed dialectically in history. This perspective aligns with Hegel's view of historical progress and his conception of the state as the highest form of ethical life (Avineri, 1974). Through this Hegelian lens, we can understand the nation-state not merely as a historical accident, but as the result of a logical progression

in political organization, synthesizing and resolving contradictions of previous forms. Thus, when considering a post-national state, we must understand the profound equilibriums that the nation state provides within its borders and in international relations and the difficulty to replace it with an alternative form of political organization, often devised in superficial ideological contexts.

To comprehend the formation of the nation-state and its borders, it is essential to analyze the fundamental concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty entails both the internal right of a nation-state to self-govern within its borders—setting and enforcing social norms, managing resources, and determining domestic policies—and the external recognition of this right by other states (Krasner, 1999). Critically, sovereignty should be understood not as a fixed condition, but as a dynamic process shaped by the historical interplay of multiple factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, geopolitical dynamics, political-cultural convergence, military capabilities, and economic viability (Agnew, 2005; Philpott, 2010).

By examining these interdependent facets of sovereignty, we can evaluate both the viability of the nation-state and the stability of its national borders. Furthermore, this analysis allows us to elucidate the multifaceted roles that national borders play in the maintenance and contestation of state sovereignty. As such, the concept of sovereignty provides a crucial lens through which to understand the complex and evolving nature of national borders in the modern state system.

3. The geopolitical factor

The geopolitical factor represents the external legitimacy of national borders, which are recognized by international treaties. The geo-political factor indicates that national borders are the result of political compromise between international forces, that will have sometimes opposing interests and are reached often after wars and years of negotiations, underlining the considerable political energy invested in the geo-political establishment and recognition of borders. The geopolitical factor must be analyzed at two levels: regional and global (Flint, 2021). At the regional level, we consider the immediate vicinity of the sovereign state, neighboring countries, or local powers (alliances) with interests in the region. At the global level, we are considering geopolitical balances between political blocs or alliances with a global scope, as was the situation during the Cold War, or interests of a superpower such as the United States that has a global reach.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s provides a good case study for examining the interplay between the geopolitical factor and the establishment of national borders and sovereignty. This example illustrates how pre-existing administrative boundaries can shape the formation of new states, and how international legal principles and interests are applied in complex political landscapes. Central to understanding the territorial outcomes of Yugoslavia's breakup is the principle of „*uti possidetis juris*”, which asserts that newly sovereign states should retain the internal administrative borders they held before independence, and it was invoked by the international community as a guiding framework (Ratner, 1996). The Badinter Arbitration Committee, established by the European Community in 1991, endorsed this principle for the Yugoslav situation, effectively transforming the republic-level administrative divisions of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia into international borders (Pellet, 1992). Yugoslavia's 1974 Constitution had granted significant autonomy to its six republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia) and two autonomous provinces within Serbia (Kosovo and Vojvodina) (Ramet, 1992). This

constitutional structure laid the groundwork for the eventual independence of these entities along their administrative lines. As the federation disintegrated, these internal demarcations became the basis for new international boundaries, with Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia (now North Macedonia), and Montenegro all achieving statehood within their former republican borders (Caplan, 2005; Radan, 2004).

The application of „*uti possidetis juris*” in the Yugoslav context had profound geopolitical implications. The mismatch between ethnic distribution and new state borders led to severe conflicts, particularly in ethnically heterogeneous areas like Bosnia and Herzegovina and parts of Croatia. While the principle provided a clear framework for recognition, it also gave rise to contested territories. Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, despite its former status as an autonomous province within Serbia, exemplifies this complexity. Despite the overall acceptance of former internal borders, some disputes emerged, such as the Croatia-Slovenia maritime disagreement in the Piran Bay, highlighting the limitations of applying administrative boundaries to international contexts (Avbelj & Letnar Cernic, 2007). The Yugoslav case demonstrates the delicate balance between maintaining regional stability through clear border delineation and addressing the aspirations of ethnic groups for self-determination.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s created a power vacuum in the Western Balkans, drawing the attention and involvement of various global and regional powers. There were major geopolitical players involved in the settlement of the crisis in the former Yugoslav territory such as the United States, the world's sole superpower following the Cold War, the European Union, NATO, the UN, and regional powers such as Russia or Turkey.

The United States played a pivotal role in the Western Balkans conflict, intervening militarily by spearheading the NATO operations in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999), decisively shifting the balance of power from Serbia. Also, the US played a diplomatic role by being involved in peace negotiations, most notably the 1995 Dayton Agreement (Chollet, 2007), that ended the Bosnian War, and by strongly supporting Kosovo's push for independence, recognizing it as a sovereign state in 2008. As the main force in NATO, the US used the alliance not only for military operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. but use it for peacekeeping, establishing long-term missions like IFOR/SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo. In the long term, NATO incorporated several Western Balkan states as members, shifting the regional security dynamics.

Alongside the US and NATO, the European Union and its influential member states like Germany, France, and the UK, sought to stabilize the political situation in the Balkans through conflict mediation, peacekeeping and economic aid, and offering the prospect of EU membership as a powerful motivator for political and economic reforms (Juncos, 2005).

In a somewhat antagonist position to the US and NATO, Russia, with historical ties to Serbia, sought to maintain its influence by consistently backing Serbia in international forums, especially regarding Kosovo's status (Headley, 2008). Russia leveraged its shared Slavic and Orthodox Christian heritage with Serbia, as well as through economic ties represented mostly by energy exports. Russia strongly criticized NATO operations, viewing them as Western expansion in its sphere of influence. China, a Russian ally, was less involved initially in the region, but it increased its economic presence in recent years, often aligning with Russia on political issues.

An important regional power, Turkey inserted themselves in the resolution of the Balkan conflict by supporting the Muslims involved in the conflict, the Bosnians and Albanians (Ekinci, 2009; Vračić, 2016).

As a neutral force, the United Nations imposed sanctions, deployed peacekeepers (UNPROFOR), and administered Kosovo (UNMIK).

The interplay of major power brokers, including the United States, European Union, and Russia, has profoundly shaped the Western Balkans' post-Yugoslav landscape, influencing border design and political stability. While their involvement was crucial in ending violent conflicts and stabilizing the region, it also led to competing spheres of influence and, in some cases, prolonged unresolved issues, such as the status of Kosovo or the complex governance structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is important to take in consideration the dynamic nature of these influences, as there is always the possibility of a shift in the position of these power brokers. Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending the current state of the Western Balkans and anticipating future developments in this strategically important region.

4. Political and cultural convergence

Political and cultural convergence represents the internal political orientation of the state towards maintaining its sovereignty. This is an inertial factor that balances the effect of the dynamicity of the geopolitical factor in establishing a state and its borders (Krasner, 1999).

In general, political and cultural convergence is directly proportional to the ethnic and religious homogeneity of the society; national identity emerges from fundamental ethnic characteristics such as language, religion, or shared customs. While the concept of nation starts as an abstract idea, disseminated in culture by (urban) power centers, the nation-building process cannot be considered entirely as “imaginary” (Anderson, 2020), as national identity is rooted in tangible, historical roots of societies (Hutchinson, 2004). If we include in the analysis the nation-formation in multicultural societies like the US and Canada, we have to upgrade the idea of national identity to the framework of “integrative culture” which occupies a dominant position in generating cultural convergence, rendering all other forms of culture to the status of subcultures (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994). This political convergence, generated by an incipient integrative culture, enabled the multicultural American colonies to start their fight for independence from the British Empire (Kaufman, 2004).

To understand the imposition of the nation-state as a generalized form of political organization requires associating the concept of political-cultural convergence with that of optimizing societal governance. From a historical perspective, empires, as forms of territorial political organization, controlled various ethnic or religious groups, but the lack of common cultural background for political convergence necessitated to be supplanted with considerable administrative and military effort (Tilly, 2017). The relative ease of generating political convergence within borders delimiting a homogeneous social space determined the imposition of the national idea as the foundation for optimal governance (Gellner, 2008; Mann, 2012). This shift towards nation-states can be seen as a process of increasing the 'legibility' of populations to state administration (Scott, 2020), facilitating more efficient governance structures.

In a previous paper (Bottyan, 2023), I pointed out that democracy, as a political system, operates within certain limitations and requires specific economic, cultural, and cohesive conditions to function effectively (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Lipset, 1959). The

social cohesion necessary for legitimizing the democratic system cannot be achieved without an integrative culture that facilitates political convergence (Kymlicka, 1995; Putnam, 2000). This integrative culture provides a shared framework for deliberation and decision-making in diverse societies (Habermas, 2015), enabling the creation of a unified political community while respecting cultural differences.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) present a compelling case study for examining the challenges of achieving political and cultural convergence in a deeply divided society.

BiH is characterized by a complex ethnic and religious landscape. According to the 2013 census, the population is composed of 50.1% Bosniaks (primarily Muslim), 30.8% Serbs (primarily Orthodox Christian), and 15.4% Croats (primarily Catholic) (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024). This diversity has historically been a source of tension and conflict.

The modern state of BiH emerged from the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The Bosnian War (1992-1995) was characterized by ethnic cleansing and genocide, resulting in approximately 100,000 deaths and displacing millions (Toe, 2016). The Dayton Agreement of 1995 ended the war but institutionalized ethnic divisions by creating a complex power-sharing system based on ethnic quotas (Bieber, 2005). The country's political structure, divided into three entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska and the Brčko District, reflects these deep ethnic cleavages. This arrangement, while initially necessary for peace, has perpetuated ethnic divisions and hindered the development of an integrative culture (Kapidžić, 2021).

The concept of integrative culture, as discussed earlier in this chapter, refers to a shared framework of values, norms, and practices that facilitates political convergence and democratic legitimacy. In BiH, the development of such an integrative culture has been severely impeded by several factors. First, we should mention the ethno-national politics, as political parties in BiH are primarily organized along ethnic lines, promoting particularistic interests rather than a common civic identity (Mujkic, 2007). This ethno-national approach to politics reinforces divisions and hinders the development of a shared political culture. The education system in BiH remains largely segregated, with different curricula for different ethnic groups. The “two schools under one roof” system perpetuates ethnic divisions and prevents the formation of a common historical narrative (Swimelar, 2013). The media role in generating a cultural convergence is undermined by the highly fragmented media landscape in BiH which is divided along ethnic lines, with different groups consuming news from different sources. This fragmentation reinforces separate information spheres and hinders the development of a common public discourse (Jusic & Ahmetašević, 2013). All these issues, that were a legacy of ethnic divisions and conflict, hindered the development of robust, cross-cutting civil society which limited inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation (Brljavac, 2011).

The above analysis demonstrates how BiH's low level of integrative culture has led to diminished sovereignty and weakened democratic processes. The country is still dependent on external power brokers as The Office of the High Representative (OHR), an ad hoc international institution, retains significant powers in BiH, including the ability to dismiss elected officials. This arrangement, while intended to ensure stability, undermines the country's sovereignty (Merdzanovic, 2015). The ethnic veto powers enshrined in the constitution often lead to political deadlock, hindering effective governance and democratic decision-making (Bahtić-Kunrath, 2011). Also, persistent corruption and limited civic engagement determined an emphasis on ethnic identity over civic identity which resulted in low levels of civic participation (OSCE, 2024) and trust

in democratic institutions (Transparency International, 2024). In conclusion, the deeply entrenched ethnic divisions, institutionalized by the Dayton Agreement, have prevented the development of a shared civic identity and common political culture leading to diminished sovereignty and weakened democracy.

5. Military power

The military dimension of sovereignty represents a critical factor in a state's ability to maintain its territorial integrity and political independence (K.N. Waltz, 1979). The military dimension of sovereignty as a distinct yet interconnected factor is heavily dependent on the economic structure and output capacity of the state and population size (Barry, 1991; Kennedy, 2010). Kennedy argues that economic resources are essential for sustaining military power, and conversely, that the overextension of military commitments can lead to economic decline. This relationship is further elaborated by Charles Tilly, who posits that war-making and state-making are intertwined with economic development, forming a tripartite relationship that has shaped the modern state system (Tilly, 2017).

In the contemporary global landscape, we can distinguish between states with varying levels of military power, largely correlated with their economic output. At the apex is the global military power of the United States, whose economic might allow it to project power globally. Below this are regional military powers such as Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Turkey, South Africa, Brazil, France, and Great Britain. These classifications are supported by recent power indexes such as the Global Firepower Index and SIPRI's military expenditure database (Global Firepower, 2024; SIPRI, 2024).

It is important to note that there are relatively few countries that have the internal military power necessary to assure their sovereignty and borders independently. Most of these are nuclear powers, highlighting the role of nuclear deterrence in the modern conception of sovereignty (Kenneth N Waltz, 2015). This reality underscores the importance of economic capacity in maintaining military capabilities, as the development and maintenance of nuclear arsenals require significant economic resources.

In the context of the Western Balkans, all countries in the region have limited military power, a reflection of their economic constraints. According to SIPRI data (SIPRI, 2024) Serbia maintains the largest military expenditure in the region at \$2.13 billion in 2023, significantly higher than its neighbors such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (\$217 million), North Macedonia (\$266 million) and Montenegro \$114 million. However, even Serbia, which maintains the largest military in the region as a legacy of its central position in the former Yugoslavia, have limited military capabilities when compared to larger regional powers or global actors with interests in the Balkans.

This disparity in military and economic power means that none of the Western Balkan countries have the ability to maintain their sovereignty through domestic military means alone, especially when considering the influence of larger power brokers with interests in the region. This situation aligns with the concept of "residual sovereignty" proposed by Stephen Krasner, where smaller states maintain formal sovereignty but are significantly constrained by external powers in their decision-making (Krasner, 1999).

The limited military and economic capabilities of Western Balkan states have led to a reliance on alliances and external support to bolster their security. NATO membership or aspirations play a crucial role in this dynamic, as outlined by Stephen Walt's alliance formation theory (Walt, 1990). For instance, North Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2020 and Montenegro's in 2017 have significantly altered their security

calculus, providing a degree of protection that their economic and military capabilities alone could not achieve.

Moreover, the economic constraints faced by these countries have implications beyond traditional military power. In an era of hybrid threats, including cyber warfare and information warfare (Hoffman, 2007), the ability to defend against these non-traditional security challenges is also heavily dependent on economic resources and technological capabilities.

Looking forward, the future sovereignty and stability of the Western Balkan region will likely continue to be shaped by the interplay between economic development, military capabilities, and external alliances. As Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson argue in “Why Nations Fail,” long-term economic success (and by extension, military power) is fundamentally tied to the development of inclusive political and economic institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013). For the Western Balkans, this suggests that strengthening democratic institutions and fostering economic growth may be as crucial for long-term sovereignty as direct military expenditures.

6. Economic viability

The economic dimension underlies all the other dimensions mentioned above. A country's economic viability represents its ability to generate wealth for its citizens, which is significantly different from just having a geographic position that includes natural resources (Auty, 2001; Sachs, 1995). A country's economic viability has a threefold influence on its sovereignty: it makes it possible to maintain a functioning society without relying too much on external resources (Chang, 2003), it provides the necessary resources for a deterrent military force (Kennedy, 2010), and it increases the chances of generating and maintaining international relations through trade that strengthen its sovereignty (Keohane & Nye Jr, 1973).

The relationship between economic viability and state sovereignty has been a crucial factor in shaping the modern state system. Charles Tilly argues that the formation and evolution of states were fundamentally driven by the interplay between economic resources and military power (Tilly, 2017). Tilly posits that successful states were those that effectively mobilized resources for war-making, which in turn required robust economic foundations. In the early modern period, as Tilly notes, European states that could extract resources efficiently and sustain large armies gained significant advantages in the international arena. This process led to a consolidation of state power and the emergence of centralized bureaucracies capable of managing complex economic systems (Tilly, 2017). The ability to generate and control economic surplus became increasingly crucial for maintaining sovereignty and projecting power beyond borders.

Hendrik Spruyt emphasizes how different forms of political organization competed based on their economic efficiency (Spruyt, 1994). The sovereign state eventually prevailed over alternatives like city-states and empires partly due to its superior ability to mobilize economic resources and provide a stable environment for trade and commerce.

The industrial revolution marked a turning point in the relationship between economic viability and sovereignty. As Kevin O'Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson argue, industrialization dramatically increased the economic potential of certain states, allowing them to assert their sovereignty more effectively on the global stage (O'Rourke Kevin & Williamson, 1999). The gap between industrialized and non-industrialized nations

became a key factor in determining the hierarchy of sovereign states in the international system.

In the 20th century, the link between economic viability and sovereignty became even more pronounced. Rawi Abdelal demonstrates how the Bretton Woods system and subsequent international economic regimes deeply influenced state sovereignty, particularly in the realm of economic policy-making (Abdelal, 2009). States with robust and diversified economies were better positioned to maintain their autonomy within these global economic frameworks. More recently, Dani Rodrik considers that the intensification of economic globalization has created new challenges for state sovereignty (Rodrik, 2011). While economic integration has provided opportunities for growth, it has also constrained the policy options available to states, particularly in smaller or less developed economies.

The measurement and indicators of economic viability are crucial for understanding a state's capacity to maintain its sovereignty. These indicators can be broadly categorized to reflect the threefold influence of economic viability on sovereignty: societal functioning, military capability, and international relations.

Firstly, to assess a state's ability to maintain a functioning society without excessive external reliance, several indicators are commonly used. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita remains a fundamental measure of a country's economic output and standard of living (World Bank, 2024). However, recognizing the limitations of GDP, economists like Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi have advocated for more comprehensive measures such as the Human Development Index (HDI), which incorporates education and health alongside economic factors (Stiglitz, 2009). The Economic Complexity Index (ECI), developed by Ricardo Hausmann and César Hidalgo, offers insights into a country's productive capabilities and potential for economic growth, reflecting its ability to generate diverse economic activities (Hidalgo & Hausmann, 2009).

Secondly, to gauge a state's capacity to provide resources for a deterrent military force, indicators related to military expenditure and technological sophistication are relevant. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) provides comprehensive data on military expenditures as a percentage of GDP, offering insights into a state's prioritization of defense (SIPRI, 2024). Additionally, the Global Firepower Index incorporates factors such as military budget, personnel, and equipment to provide a more holistic view of military capability (Global Firepower, 2024).

Lastly, to assess a state's ability to generate and maintain international relations through trade, several trade-related indicators are pertinent. The trade-to-GDP ratio, measuring the combined weight of total trade in a country's economy, is a key indicator of trade openness (World Bank, 2024). The KOF Globalisation Index, developed by Axel Dreher, provides a more comprehensive measure of a country's integration into the global economy, considering economic, social, and political dimensions of globalization (Dreher, 2006).

Furthermore, the concept of economic resilience, as discussed by Briguglio, offers a framework for assessing a country's ability to withstand and recover from external economic shocks, which is crucial for maintaining sovereignty in an interconnected global economy (Briguglio, 2004). This includes measures of macroeconomic stability, market efficiency, good governance, and social development.

It's important to note that these indicators should not be considered in isolation. As emphasized by Dani Rodrik in "One Economics, Many Recipes", the relationship

between economic indicators and actual economic viability can vary significantly depending on a country's specific context and development strategy (Rodrik, 2008). Moreover, as Susan Strange argues that non-traditional aspects of economic power, such as control over credit and knowledge structures, are increasingly important in determining a state's economic viability and, by extension, its sovereignty (Strange, 1996). In conclusion, while no single indicator can fully capture a state's economic viability, a combination of these measures can provide a comprehensive understanding of a state's economic foundations for sovereignty.

Considering the theoretical foundation presented above, we can assess the economic viability of Western Balkan countries and how it reflects on societal functioning, military capability, and international relations.

Regarding societal functioning, GDP per capita figures for 2023 show some disparities within the region: Serbia (\$11,361), Montenegro (\$12,017), North Macedonia (\$8,146), Albania (\$8,368), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (\$8,426) (World Bank, 2024). These figures, while showing growth over the past decade, remain well below the EU average of \$40,824, indicating limited economic output and potentially constrained ability to maintain societal functions independently.

The Human Development Index (HDI) offers a broader perspective on societal well-being. As of 2022, the scores were: Serbia (0.805), Montenegro (0.826), North Macedonia (0.765), Albania (0.789), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (0.779) (UNDP, 2024). These scores place the countries in the "high human development" category, suggesting moderate success in translating economic growth into social benefits, albeit with room for improvement.

The Economic Complexity Index (ECI) for 2021 reveals varying levels of economic diversification: Serbia (0.73), North Macedonia (0.13), Bosnia and Herzegovina (0.77), Albania (-0.23) (Harvard Growth Lab., 2024). These figures suggest that Serbia and North Macedonia have more diverse and potentially resilient economies, while others, particularly Albania and Montenegro, may be more vulnerable to economic shocks due to less complex economic structures.

Concerning military capability, SIPRI data on military expenditure as a percentage of GDP for 2023 shows: Serbia (2.85%), Montenegro (1.63%), North Macedonia (1.70%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (0.81%), and Albania (1.74%) (SIPRI, 2024). While these figures are not insignificant, they are generally lower than the NATO guideline of 2% of GDP, potentially indicating limited capacity for independent military deterrence. The Global Firepower Index 2024 rankings further illustrate the military capabilities: Serbia (56st), Bosnia and Herzegovina (116th), North Macedonia (110th), Albania (90th), and Montenegro (129th) out of 145 countries ranked (Global Firepower, 2024). These rankings suggest relatively limited military power, particularly for the smaller states in the region.

Regarding international relations and trade integration, the trade-to-GDP ratios for 2023 were: Serbia (124%), Montenegro (120%), North Macedonia (159%), Albania (85%), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (101%) (World Bank, 2024). These figures indicate a high degree of trade openness, particularly for North Macedonia and Serbia, suggesting significant integration into global trade networks. The KOF Globalization Index 2021 scores provide a more comprehensive view of global integration: Serbia (77.03), Montenegro (63.65), North Macedonia (62.85), Albania (55.24), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (63.18) (KOF Swiss Economic Institute, 2024). These scores indicate

moderate levels of globalization, with Serbia and Montenegro showing higher levels of integration.

In conclusion, this data paints a picture of Western Balkan economies with moderate economic viability. While they show signs of progress and integration into the global economy, they face challenges in all three areas affecting sovereignty. Their ability to function independently is constrained by relatively low economic output and complexity. Military capabilities, while existent, are limited compared to larger powers. Their high trade openness suggests strong international economic ties, but potentially also vulnerability to external economic pressures. These factors collectively indicate that while these states maintain formal sovereignty, their economic viability poses challenges to fully independent action in the international system, aligning with Krasner's concept of "compromised sovereignty" (Krasner, 1999).

7. The changing roles of the national borders in the context of European federalization trend

The changing roles of national borders in the context of European integration represent a critical juncture in the continent's political and social evolution. While there has been a discernible ideological shift towards a post-national organization of society, concretized in the building of federalist institutions at the EU level, this trend merits careful examination. This chapter argues that national borders play crucial synthetic roles in assuring both societal sustainability and diversity, which are paramount for the vitality of the European continent.

Societal sustainability, as conceptualized here, is achieved through the delicate balancing of political and cultural convergence, demographics, and economic viability - a process in which the nation-state plays a crucial role. David Miller's argues that national identity provides an essential foundation for social solidarity and democratic politics (Miller, 1995). Furthermore, Wolfgang Streeck's concept of "bounded solidarity" underscores how democratic politics and welfare systems have historically been most effective within national boundaries (Streeck, 1997).

Equally important is the role of national borders in maintaining societal diversity. Not all nation-states achieve the aforementioned equilibrium with identical cultural and economic ideas, policies, and institutions. This diversity of approaches, reminiscent of the "varieties of capitalism", theory proposed by Hall and Soskice, ensures a multiplicity of paths, highlighting optimal solutions through comparison and competition (Soskice, 2004).

The trend towards European federalization, often framed as a progressive deconstruction of the nation-state, raises concerns about dangerous centralization that may endanger both societal sustainability and diversity. This critique by Giandomenico Majone who highlights the potential for suboptimal policy outcomes resulting from over-centralization in a diverse union (Majone, 2009).

The indiscriminate liberalization of goods and labor flows, a cornerstone of European integration, has significantly diminished the role of borders in delimiting national economic spaces. As the Western Balkan states are preparing to enter the EU, we propose an analysis of Romania's experience, a neighboring country, following its 2007 EU accession, which offers a stark example of the unintended consequences of this policy.

After joining the EU, Romania experienced a substantial outflow of its workforce, primarily due to economic disparities with Western European countries. According to Eurostat data, Romania's net migration rate has been consistently negative

since accession, with a cumulative loss of 892,303 people between 2007 and 2021 (World Bank, 2024). Some estimates suggest that up to 3.1 million Romanians were living in other EU countries by 2022, representing nearly 16% of the country's population (Statista, 2024).

This mass emigration has created what can be described as a “precarious equilibrium” that fails to account for the complex interplay of political, cultural, and demographic factors necessary for sustainable societal development. While remittances from Romanian workers abroad have contributed significantly to the country's economy - accounting for about 2,8% of GDP in 2023 (World Bank, 2024) - this economic benefit comes at a considerable social cost.

Romania's demographic situation has become increasingly unsustainable. The country's total fertility rate stood at 1.8 children per woman in 2022, well below the replacement level of 2.1 (World Bank, 2024). Combined with high emigration rates, this has led to a rapidly aging population and a shrinking workforce. The old-age dependency ratio in Romania is projected to more than double from 28.1% in 2019 to 57.1% by 2050 (European Commission, 2024).

Moreover, the political and cultural convergence within Romania has been profoundly affected. A Eurobarometer survey in 2019 found that only 37% of Romanians tend to trust their national government, compared to 57% who trust the European Union (Eurobarometer, 2019). This erosion of trust in national institutions potentially undermines the country's capacity for self-governance and autonomous policy-making.

This situation exemplifies what Dani Rodrik terms the “globalization trilemma,” where deep economic integration, national sovereignty, and democratic politics cannot be fully achieved simultaneously (Rodrik, 2011). In Romania's case, the pursuit of economic integration has come at the cost of demographic stability and, potentially, democratic self-determination. The Romanian case illustrates that while free movement of labor can provide short-term economic benefits, it may also create long-term challenges for societal sustainability. This “precarious equilibrium” fails to consider the complex conditions necessary for workforce replacement and societal reproduction over time. As argued by scholars like Christian Joppke, such developments can lead to a “denationalization” of citizenship, potentially undermining the nation-state's capacity to maintain social cohesion and democratic legitimacy (Joppke, 2003).

The trend towards European federalization raises concerns about the suppression of societal diversity through the implementation of centralized policies. This process often involves the promotion of “common values” by EU institutions, which can be seen as an attempt to uniformize the diverse national cultural landscapes of Europe. This paper argues that this approach may undermine the principle of subsidiarity and national sovereignty in sensitive social and cultural matters.

The EU's approach to policy implementation in sensitive areas such as migration and gender issues has sparked debate about the balance between centralized governance and national sovereignty.

Modern gender theory, as articulated by scholars like Judith Butler (Butler, 2002), proposes a distinction between biological sex and gender identity, advocating for the recognition of diverse gender expressions and sexual behaviors. The reception of these ideas varies significantly across EU member states, with some countries showing resistance to related policies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

The implementation of policies based on these theories at the EU level raises questions about the potential risks of uniform application across diverse national

contexts. This situation invites comparison with other large-scale social engineering attempts, such as the economic policies of former communist states. As James C. Scott argues, top-down social transformation projects often struggle to account for local knowledge and practices (Scott, 2020).

While the comparison between gender theory implementation and communist economic policies is contentious, both represent attempts at significant societal change. The communist experiment's focus on eliminating economic inequality through the abolition of private property ultimately proved unsustainable. Similarly, policies that significantly alter societal norms around gender and family structures may have far-reaching, though different, societal impacts. Recent demographic trends in the EU highlight potential challenges: Eurostat reports that in 2022 the EU-27's total fertility rate was 1.46 live births per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1 (Eurostat, 2024). While multiple factors contribute to this trend, it underscores the importance of carefully considering policies that may affect fundamental societal structures.

Similarly, EU migration policies have faced varying levels of acceptance. According to the UN, in 2022, there were 23.8 million non-EU nationals living in the EU, representing 5.1% of the EU population (UNRIC, 2024). Some member states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, have expressed strong reservations about EU-wide migration policies (Pachocka, 2016).

Given these complexities, the concept of “experimentalist governance” in the EU suggests that diverse national approaches can serve as valuable policy experiments (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010). This approach could allow for more nuanced implementation of new ideas, respecting the principle of subsidiarity and the diverse cultural landscapes within the EU.

The European Union's path towards deeper integration presents a unique case in the study of federalization processes. Unlike traditional federal systems, the EU represents a complex, evolving form of federalization that combines elements of various federal models. At one end, we have “bottom-up” or organic federalization, exemplified by the early stages of US federalism, where states voluntarily came together based on shared values and interests (Riker, 1964). This approach relies heavily on what Kymlicka calls a “societal culture” that facilitates political integration (Kymlicka, 1995). However, the EU lacks this strong, pre-existing common identity that could generate intrinsic political convergence across its member states. In the middle of the spectrum, we find models of “negotiated federalism,” seen in cases like Canada or Switzerland. These systems acknowledge persistent diversity while seeking common ground through ongoing negotiation to maintain federal cohesion (Gagnon & Tully, 2001). The EU shares some characteristics with this model, as it constantly negotiates between diverse national interests. However, the EU's development perhaps most closely aligns with what can be termed “functional federalism.” This concept, rooted in neo-functionalist theory, suggests that integration is driven by functional needs and spillover effects (Haas, 2020). The EU has developed shared institutions to address common challenges, even in the absence of a strong common identity.

The challenge for the EU is to avoid sliding towards a “top-down” model of federalism, historically seen in entities like the Soviet Union, where central authorities played a dominant role in maintaining federal structures (Stepan, 1999). The risk of developing an authoritarian center that imposes its will on component states is a concern that European policymakers must actively address.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the complex interplay between national borders, sovereignty, and European integration, with a particular focus on the Western Balkans. Through our analysis of geopolitical factors, political and cultural convergence, military power, and economic viability, we have demonstrated the multifaceted nature of sovereignty and the crucial role that national borders play in maintaining both societal sustainability and diversity.

The case studies presented, including the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the challenges faced by Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Romania's post-EU accession experience, highlight the delicate balance required in managing regional integration while respecting national sovereignty. These examples underscore the potential risks associated with indiscriminate liberalization and centralization policies, particularly in regions with complex historical and cultural landscapes.

Our examination of the EU's approach to policy implementation in sensitive areas such as migration and gender issues further emphasizes the importance of respecting national diversity and the principle of subsidiarity. The concept of "experimentalist governance" (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010) offers a potential framework for allowing diverse national approaches to serve as valuable policy experiments, thereby preserving the richness of the European cultural landscape.

As the EU continues its path towards deeper integration, it faces the challenge of developing a model that respects the distinct "demoi" of member states while addressing common challenges. The concept of the EU as a "demoicracy" provides a useful framework for conceptualizing this balance (Nicolaïdis, 2013). This approach, combined with the development of "constitutional patriotism" (Habermas, 2017), could offer a way forward that respects diversity while fostering a shared commitment to democratic values and procedures.

However, significant challenges remain. The persistent "democratic deficit" in EU institutions and the ongoing need to balance functional integration with respect for national identities will require continued negotiation and innovation in governance structures (Follesdal & Hix, 2006).

In conclusion, this paper argues for a nuanced approach to European integration that recognizes the enduring importance of national borders in fostering sustainable and diverse societies. As the Western Balkan states prepare for potential EU accession, policymakers must carefully consider the lessons learned from previous enlargements and the unique challenges posed by the region's complex history. The future of European integration lies not in the wholesale dismantling of national borders, but in the thoughtful reconfiguration of their roles to balance the benefits of integration with the preservation of national sovereignty and societal diversity.

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