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Competing Sovereignties: Intertwinement, Contestation, Evolution | Report on the Second Graduate Workshop

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This report presents the 2nd Graduate workshop conference Competing Sovereignties: Intertwinement, Contestation, Evolution that was organized by the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies at the University of Regensburg in cooperation with the Leibniz ScienceCampus: Europe and America in the Modern World. The organizing committee consisted of Lena-Marie Franke, Elia Bescotti, Magdolna Molnár, and Jon Matlack. The workshop took place online on 3 and 4 December 2021. A detailed programme can be found [here](#). The event has laid the foundations for a forthcoming edited volume on Sovereignty through Practice. Here the multiscalar, interdisciplinary and reflexive approaches to an area studies-inflected approach to a key, contested concept become clear.



The workshop brought together early career scholars and graduate students to discuss the concept of sovereignty through a multiscalar approach. The participants' contributions employed perspectives from various disciplines, including, among others, history, political science, anthropology, and cultural studies, spanning the period from the nineteenth century to the present. Furthermore, the diverse approaches examined the meanings attributed to the practice of sovereignty, with the contribution being global in scope while offering national and/or transnational focus on areas in the Americas, Africa, and Europe. The overarching aim of the conference was to address sovereignty, its sources, locations, applications, and performances using multiscalar area studies approaches.



The four panels featured fifteen papers that were framed by the opening keynote lecture titled “Sovereignty: How to Give it Meaning?” by Professor Emeritus BRUNO COPPIETERS (Brussels). Coppieters began his talk by referencing the existence of different readings of sovereignty that shape his interest in the concept. He further outlined the critical conceptions of sovereignty he applies in his political science research.

Coppieters highlighted the importance of challenging established meanings of concepts and consistently rethinking the notion of sovereignty. His main question, “Can we differentiate sovereignty?”, framed the term both as a single concept and as a theoretical perspective whose application and usefulness not only needs clarification but also justification, especially in scholarship. Following an overview of classical conceptions of the term “sovereignty”, he moved on to Stephan Kasner’s work, examined the notion of sovereignty as an idea of ultimate power standing above the political community, i.e. above the ruler and the ruled. Coppieters drew analogies between this conception and the function of other concepts and universal powers regarding sovereignty such as God, Emperors, the Pope in the sixteenth century, and other institutions making claims to universality, like the UN today. The aim of his *longue-durée* perspective was to show the shifting definitions of sovereignty, as well as how sources of authority and those claiming ultimate authority have been resisted and replaced.

For Coppieters, the transition to democracy is a further complication of how power is converted into authority and where sovereignty is located. This has been made more complex in a globalized world, he argued, where the division of the world into two realms, the national and international, or the domestic and global, is an evident oversimplification. Still, the concept of sovereignty, he showed, remains useful as an analytical frame, mediating the between these scales. He approaches

Sovereignty as a frame: not in the same way as a theory or a theoretical concept, but in the sense that the frame mediates between internal and external. The frame is part of both, but it is external to the internal and internal to the external.

Panel 1 - Identifying Pathways to Emergent Sovereignities

The panel, chaired by Jon Matlack (Regensburg), discussed the birth of statehood and sovereignities on multi-level scales, with presentations about the international, national, and federal realms.

SILVIA NICOLA (Freie Universität Berlin) drew on Krasner's conceptualization for quantifying state building (domestic, Westphalian and international): it revolves around questions of authority and control, bringing together internal and external dynamics of political entities, as well as the interactions with the international system. In her presentation "Competing Sovereignities during the Interactions between Emerging and Established States", Nicola showed how she applied Krasner's three categories in her research. First, domestic sovereignty is used to bundle questions regarding authority within polities. The concept of Westphalian sovereignty exemplified to what extent a political entity is able to act without interference from external actors. This type of sovereignty raises interesting questions about already established states, as in the case of the EU member-states, which choose to transfer some of their sovereignty to other institutions where economic and international relations are concerned. Finally, the international concept pertains to legal recognition, so to what extent a state or an entity is recognized as being a state by the international community. Nicola introduced the term "want-to-be-states" to illustrate her understanding of sovereignty as a something positioned on a shifting continuum, or indeed a set of continuums since, as she showed, it is possible to enjoy strong domestic sovereignty and a weak Westphalian one.

The next by NELLY GÉRARD (Liège) reflected upon the different meanings ascribed to sovereignty in the UK after Brexit. Her talk "After Devolution and Brexit, What is Left of the UK's Sovereignty? Competing Narratives of Sovereignty and State in Scottish Political Parties' 2021 Manifestos" focused on Scotland and upon how political actors perceive the new status quo. Gérard explained that EU membership led the UK towards multilevel structural governance, giving rise to notions of shared sovereignty within the UK. She considered the frictions emerging from intersecting ideas and practices of national devolution and EU membership. The acknowledgement of multiple political communities in the UK led to a multilevel type of structure and power. While a prominent pro-Brexit argument was reclaiming power for the UK parliament, Gérard argued that leaving the EU undermined the sovereignty of Westminster. Her analysis of post-Brexit Scottish election results showed how shared power ideas in the UK are well rooted in Scottish political thought although in practice devolution processes and Brexit

leave in place power differences within the UK.

VLADISLAV LILIĆ (Vanderbilt University) gave a presentation entitled “Lost in a Sea of Mountains: Border Making on the Ottoman-Montenegrin Frontier (1856-1860)”. He traced how transimperial legal regimes and imperial legal reforms created new border regimes in the nineteenth-century Balkans. He also described how border making following the European bilateral model stemmed from a dialectic between state power and residents, employed migration mechanisms and compensated those on the border. In contrast, the Balkan technique was rather different, as Lilić’s case study of Montenegro showed. The Great Powers and the Ottoman authorities were involved in the creation of the Montenegrin border through prolonged entanglement with local populations. Lilić particularly highlighted how Montenegro was a polity that empires could not absorb and whose sovereignty was attenuated. This situation rendered Montenegro an “impossible state”. Lilić determined that border making in the Balkans was a multilateral endeavor, new borders reflected new sovereignty in an era of crisis and reform and, finally, Montenegro’s not-quite-sovereign political standing demonstrated how webs of international political relations could incorporate different nodes of statehood.

In a similar context, DAMJAN MATKOVIČ (Regensburg), discussed nineteenth century Eastern European sovereignties. His presentation “Complete autonomy? Influence of the Ottoman Empire and Russia on Serbia in the first half of the nineteenth century (until 1856)” focused on the transitional period of Serbia’s move from being part of an empire to becoming an autonomous state. Matkovič was particularly interested in the influence of the Ottoman Empire after the signing of the highest documents in Ottoman Empire in 1829 (hatt-i sharif), which made Serbia fully autonomous. Matkovič grounded his argument by highlighting two instances where a Serbian constitution was drafted along French and Turkish examples, concluding that these instances showed how Serbia was not allowed to independently determine its future, despite its autonomous status. On the other hand, Russia – a traditional ally of the Serbs – also gained influence in the area after losing Crimea. Serbia therefore attracted attention from the Great Powers who played the role of protectors while pursuing their own interests. Matkovič concluded that Serbia’s path to independence was not straightforward, with the promises in official treaties not necessarily translating into autonomy.

Panel 2 - Negotiating Sovereignty through Resource Usage

Moderated by Magdolna Molnár (then Regensburg, now Cottbus-Senftenberg), the second panel of the conference focused on the relationship between sovereignty and resources.

In her presentation “Environmental Colonialism: A Better Bargain for Sustaining Capitalism”, HENRIETTA OMO ESHALOMI (Ibadan, Nigeria), explored the intersections of capitalism with environmental injustice and colonialism in Nigeria. Eshalomi reflected on the government’s position in Nigeria, which is rich in crude oil but devastated by constant pollution and marked by the colonial experience. Eshalomi explained that the native population are hindered from defending themselves

against invaders and the oppression of environmental colonialism as the Nigerian government lacks the sovereignty to control the resources in its territory or to tackle the consequences of oil extraction. She added that environmental colonialism does not end with pollution, as it has lasting effects in other realms, such as the economy and social life. Esahlomi sees government sovereignty in Nigeria as fragmented because multinational corporations, driven by profit, strongly influence government policy on national resources, with the economic system creating social tensions and indeed victims.

GUGLIELMO MIGLIORI (Brussels) touched upon sovereignty issues stemming from Russian politics in the Arctic context. His presentation “Shared sovereignty over the Svalbard? Russia’s strategy to gain a strategic condominium in the High North” explored questions of the indivisibility of sovereignty. Migliori highlighted the significant geostrategic position of the Svalbard archipelago (it is on the passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic across the North Pole) and its rich geological setting (great gas and oil resources). According to Migliori, problems were largely resolved in 1920 Treaty of Svalbard that introduced a unique legal regime, with the territory put under Norwegian jurisdiction but permitted entry or granted visas to 46 other parties while prohibiting the construction of fortifications or naval bases, or conducting military activities in the region. The Slavic presence in Svalbard has declined significantly after the collapse of USSR, although, Migliori showed, Russia is reinstating its influence on the archipelago by engaging in disputes to ensure the development of Russian commercial and energy interests in the region. This emphasizes how Norway’s sovereignty over the Svalbard is reduced and partialized, rather than reflecting classical stricter definitions of absolute sovereignty.

ALLISON HASKINS (Kaiserslautern – Atlantische Akademie Rheinland-Pfalz), employed a transnational multilateral perspective on sovereignty. In “Discussions of Sovereignty Across the Atlantic: An examination of how NATO countries weigh the contributions of land access”, Haskins outlined the debates over monetary and other contributions to NATO. Drawing on John Coen, Haskins perceived the emergence of a new but highly contested regime that is redefining the legal prerogative of the sovereign state. Examining processes for making available land for military bases, Haskins’ examined how non-fiscal contributions affects views of sovereignty within NATO countries. Her case study of an air base located in Germany revealed how giving up land over time saw the local economy around the base become dependent on the American military. The emphasis on contributions of money and personnel was reflected in government speeches while territory was scarcely addressed.

Focusing on the post-Soviet space, CORNELIA SAHLING’S presentation discussed “Reinforcing Monetary Sovereignty: A new policy regime (2014/15) for the Central Bank of Russia”. Her main argument was that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia exhibited a general tendency towards more autonomous policies involving a degree of central bank independence from the government, reflecting the influence of international monetary systems and practices, including a shift towards flexible exchange rates and introduced inflation targeting. Questions of the international reserves were significant, since in the 1990s the Russian economy was highly dependent on the US dollar and the US

economy. During the Putin era, however, there has been a clear policy goal of achieving more sovereignty. Still, even if monetary sovereignty was implemented in the central bank policy goals and the terms ‘payment sovereignty’ and ‘financial sovereignty’ appear in official documents, there is no clear definition of sovereignty. The policy reforms of the mid-2010s that sought more monetary sovereignty, Sahling concluded, reflected experiences of shifting from mistrust to accepting foreign influence.

Panel 3 - Cultural Sovereignty and State Intervention

The first speaker on this panel, moderated by Lena-Marie Franke, was, KSENIA MAKSIMOVTSOVA (HSE, St. Petersburg). In her presentation “One Nation – One Language? The Ambiguity of the State Language Policy and Policy towards Minorities in Contemporary Latvia and Ukraine”, she outlined the applicability of the one nation-one language model in Ukraine and Latvia. Presenting the results from recent surveys, she showed the ambiguities of policies in each country while adopting a comparative approach to suggest that the trajectories are increasingly convergent with policies of decommunization and derussification taking effect, albeit later in Ukraine than Latvia. She also commented on how in both states the constitutional court was used as a tool for securing the status of Ukrainian and Latvian speakers. This worked more effectively in Ukraine, she concluded, with the Ukrainian language being granted constitutional value.

In his presentation “In the Name of Beer: Multinational Disputes over a National Cultural Commodity during the late Cold War”, JOHN GILLESPIE (Vanderbilt University) discussed the beer purity law in the context of legal and cultural sovereignty. He outlined the importance of beer in German culture, detailing the history of legislation on beer involving Germany and what is now the European Union. In 1987, the European Court of Justice sought to strike down the German beer purity law and permit the import of products with chemical additives. Gillespie’s central argument was that the efforts of the Federal Republic to defend the beer purity law from the legal challenge of the European Commission demonstrates how easily a threat to an important cultural commodity can trigger symbolic assertions of national rights over multilateral integration. For Gillespie, Germany’s national attempts to define and name a vital cultural commodity hint at deep wells of potential conflicts over claims of cultural sovereignty in the European Union.

MATTHIAS MELCHER (LMU, Munich) gave a talk titled “Playing for Sovereignty in the App Store of History: Online Games Issued by the Polish Institute for National Remembrance and their Role in Memory Politics”. Tracing the effects of digital media on memory issues and the mediating of national history via games, Melcher presented a case study of The Unconquered campaign published in 2020 by the Polish Institute for National Remembrance (IPN). He highlighted how the struggle for sovereignty was reflected in digital materials for educational and research purposes. Melcher’s talk elucidated the way many contemporary historical games work through player agency, with the IPN’s rationale being that history is made by individual decisions and faith, and less so by circumstances. The video game

mirrors this by allowing players to reenact the histories and try to make their own decisions when leading the gamified Polish struggle for sovereignty, framed, as Melcher argued, according to the memory politics of the ruling party. Games and new media could expand such discourses beyond traditional audiences.

Panel 4 - Locating Sovereignty through Scales of Contestation

The final panel of the conference workshop was chaired by Elia Bescotti, with VIVIANA GARCÍA PINZÓN (Marburg) opening it with her presentation “Sovereignty and Negotiated Governance in the Urban Peripheries of Latin America”. She focused on the relationship between violence and order in El Salvador and Colombia, emphasizing that violence is not equal to disorder and that urban violence in Latin America is not a problem of state absence, but rather is something reproduced between governance and other actors (militia, social intolerance groups, extralegal groups). Calling for a departure from state centered approaches in seeking to understand sovereignty in urban Latin American contexts, García Pinzón stated: “In practical terms sovereignty on the ground reveals that it is fermented, fluid and continuously recreated among three actors: the state, criminal groups, and the dwellers.” She introduced two main concepts concerning local order and violence, namely *de facto* sovereignty and hybrid governance, with the former term shifting the focus from state legality to the ability to punish or kill with impunity. This means criminal organizations can be *de facto* sovereign, their power stemming from their capacity to decide who lives and who dies. Hybrid governance refers to the interaction among the state, criminal organizations and local residents that produces local order. García Pinzón’s empirical research demonstrates the fluid character of sovereignty and its co-creation via the interaction among state, criminal actors and communities.

In his presentation “Highways to Hell: Allied Armor on German Roads – Negotiating Sovereignty through infrastructure by Local and State Practitioners in the Cold War”, JON MATLACK (Regensburg) explored the paradoxical question where sovereignty was located during Cold War training exercises on German territory. Matlack’s conception of sovereignty as a symbolic form of “Western” understanding of the world suggested a two-fold focus: territory, on the one hand, and the everyday practices of sovereignty through the individuals’ national and state roles, on the other. Matlack explained how training exercises in the 1950s and 60s revealed the fuzziness of sovereignty, as exemplified by the conflicts of interest between military forces of the guest countries and the host West Germany. Troop exercises resulted in destroyed roads, bridges, and land that the local authorities demanded to be paid for and fixed by the military forces. Matlack stated that “the overall conflict resolution pointed towards invoking the Western civilization as what needs to be defended”, blurring hierarchies and contesting the implementation of authority. Increasingly, the UK and US military administration was embedded within the West German civilian authorities, with the local authorities of sovereign West Germany gradually becoming more tolerant towards the troops. They ultimately acquiesced to the American military use of land, creating, as Matlack argued, a situation challenging definitions that see sovereignty as tied to

mastery over territory.

TIM KUCHARZEWSKI (Potsdam) discussed “A State of Imaginary: How War Shapes Narratives of Sovereignty”. Inspired by Benedict Anderson and Edward Said, Kucharzewski took a different perspective on sovereignty, presenting it as a constructed and discursive idea, characterized by interpretative fluidity. Central to this understanding of sovereignty is the notion of identity and of demarcating oneself in contradistinction to some “Other”. Kucharzewski stated that as more and more actors are involved in identity construction, certain signs and semiotic symbols generate a semiosphere, which contributes to the creation of a community seeking sovereignty. His examples of conflicts over sovereignty came from regions in Georgia and the Caucasus, with Georgian perspectives of the Russian occupation entangled in the broader Georgian game of imagined sovereignty. Kucharzewski also discussed the Georgian discourse of the country belonging to the West while working through the dual heritage of Stalin and a history partially shared with a part of the world Georgia wants to disassociate from.

The workshop concluded with “Uncertain sovereignty: The Borderland of Teschen Silesia in times of upheaval (1918–1920)”, the presentation given by Dr. MATTHÄUS WEHOWSKI (TU Dresden). After a short overview of the history of Silesia, Wehowski focused on the years 1918–1920 and the importance of self-determination for the population. He showed that there were four main ideas of sovereignty in the region: failure of reforms of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 and subsequent attempts to establish borders. First, there was the Czech idea based on history and eighteenth-century notions of statehood. The Czechs claimed that Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia were part of the historical crown lands of Bohemia, hence the desire to restore historical rights. Polish nationalists, on the other hand, mostly expressed the idea of sovereignty and nationalism as following primarily ethnic and linguistic lines. This contrasted with weaker attempts by the German-speaking minority, who articulated claims based on language-islands with the right to self-determination. Finally, the fourth idea of sovereignty was that of some Silesians, who claimed that the Habsburg emperor was the rightful sovereign. Wehowski stated that in practice, the only possible way for sovereignty was only via military and administrative power: Poland and Czechoslovakia at that time, whereas the Silesians and Germans had no chance of realizing their claims.

Running through the workshop was the idea of sovereignty as a functional normative concept. Sovereignty was discussed in multiscalar terms, as a tool for claiming and negotiating power on the interlocking and overlapping local, national, and international levels.

Conclusion

Running through the workshop was the idea of sovereignty as a functional normative concept. Sovereignty was discussed in multiscalar terms, as a tool for claiming and negotiating power on the interlocking and overlapping local, national, and international levels. The interdisciplinary nature of the event enabled fruitful discussions, laying the ground for future critical reflections on the concept of sovereignty. Some of these ideas will find expression in an edited volume on state sovereignty tentatively titled *Sovereignty through Practice: Multiscalarity, Interdisciplinarity, Reflexivity*. It will likely be published by the end of 2024. Edited by Jon Matlack (Regensburg) and Elia Bescotti (Brussels), the volume can summarised as follows:

Frequently regarded as impenetrable and indivisible, we examine sovereignty as a dynamic force that is practised into existence by actors. Located above, beyond, within, and even in lieu of the state, these actors exercise sovereignty at varying and competing levels. Geographically, this volume incorporates case studies from regional contexts, such as Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Atlantic (through NATO), and nation-states, such as the UK and Scotland, Russia and Ukraine, and Poland, but also in the unrecognised states of Kurdistan-Iraq and Abkhazia. Within these contexts, sovereignty's actors are found in traditional power brokers, such as political parties, central banks, and military command structures. Beyond these, sovereignty is practised by non-state actors in service or even in spite of the state, like criminal gangs in El Salvador, digital platform companies, and nationalist movements in post-WWI Poland. This book features three co-authored chapters by the volume's contributors who reflect on how scholars interact with state sovereignty. Joining emerging and innovative literature on positionality, these chapters capture how field research, archival research, and discourse analysis all intimately place the scholar as a co-protagonist of their own studies on sovereignty.

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Nargiza Kilichova has been developing her dissertation on “International Democracy and Rule of Law Promotion in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus—Spaces and Places of Struggle” at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg. Her PhD project was part of the IOS research project Between Conflict and Cooperation: The Politics of International Law in the post-Soviet Space (2019–2022), funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). At the Leibniz ScienceCampus Regensburg, Thalia is developing her interdisciplinary research on contemporary issues of political change and continuity. Her PhD project takes a critical angle on contemporary far-right groups and parties. The central research questions revolve around populist far-right rhetoric in Europe and the Americas with a comparative focus on Greece and the USA. The goal of the project is to engage critically with tropes of homeland and to analyze the use of symbols and metaphors in far-right textual and audiovisual political narratives. Key terms for this project are: homeland, White Supremacy, transatlantic studies, hypernationalism and populism.