

The nation-state as a structural actor of democratic metamorphosis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the return of the nation-state as a structural actor in the contemporary transformation of democracy. Starting from the critique of the post-sovereignty paradigm of the 1990s—which predicted the progressive erosion of state sovereignty in the face of globalization and multi-level governance—the paper argues that developments of the last decade have shown the analytical limits of this model. The financial crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, the return of war in Europe, and geopolitical rivalry between great powers have restored the nation-state as a central node of security, political economy, and democratic legitimacy.

The paper also treats the case of Albania and Kosova as a micro-laboratory of this democratic metamorphosis, where the tensions between limited sovereignty, institutional legitimacy, and geopolitical pressure appear in a condensed manner. The analysis argues that without a functional state and real capacities for action, democracy risks being reduced to a formal procedure, while the strengthening of the state—if it remains within the democratic framework—can serve as a prerequisite for institutional resilience.

In conclusion, the study suggests that the return of the nation-state should not be interpreted as a historical regression, but as a sign of an ontological metamorphosis of democracy in the post-neoliberal order. In this process, the nation-state appears as a political space where sovereignty, security and democratic representation are negotiated, while for the Albanian space the reconfiguration of state capacities and their functional integration appear as key factors for democratic stability and geopolitical role in Southeast Europe.

Keywords: Nation-state, contemporary democracy, functional sovereignty, metamorphosis of democracy, Kosova and Albania in geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary debate on democracy is taking place at a moment of profound paradigmatic dislocation. The theoretical frameworks that dominated after the end of the Cold War – especially those that predicted the progressive decline of the nation-state in the face of globalization, supranational integration, and multilevel governance – are now confronted with an empirical reality that challenges them to their foundations. Instead of a “post-sovereign” world, characterized by the steady transfer of powers to transnational actors, an international order is crystallizing in which the nation-state is restored as a structural node of power, security, and democratic legitimacy.

This essay seeks to position the nation-state not as an anachronistic remnant of political modernity, but as a structural actor of democratic metamorphosis in the conditions of the post-neoliberal order and geopolitical

fragmentation. The central argument is that democracy can no longer be understood as a purely procedural or normatively universal architecture, detached from the real capacities of the state to exercise functional sovereignty. On the contrary, the current transformation of democracy is inseparable from the transformation of the nation-state itself: from a minimalist guarantor of market rules to a strategic actor that combines security, political economy, and the protection of democratic order.

In this sense, the post-sovereignty paradigm of the 1990s – which treated sovereignty as an obstacle and the state as a unit destined to be overcome – appears today as theoretically inadequate and analytically reductive. It underestimated the conflictual dimension of international politics, overestimated the autonomy of markets, and assumed that democracy could survive without a strong and coherent state substrate. Developments of the last decade – from financial crises and pandemics to war, economic sanctions, and technological rivalries – have

shown that without a functional state there is no democratic resilience.

The introduction to this chapter aims, therefore, to establish the theoretical framework for a reconceptualization of the relationship between the state, sovereignty, and democracy. Starting from the critique of the post-sovereignty paradigm and from realist and geopolitical readings of the international order, this essay argues that the nation-state is not in historical regression, but in a process of metamorphosis. It is precisely in this process that it becomes a necessary condition for the survival and deepening of democracy in an increasingly polarized and uncertain world.

1. The Post-Sovereignty Paradigm and Its Analytical Limits

The dominant discourse on democracy in the last three decades has been built on the assumption that the nation-state represents a historically outdated form of political organization. Globalization, supranational integration, and liberal normative universalism have been presented as inevitable horizons of “democratic maturity,” while state sovereignty has been reduced to an obstructive relic of transnational flows. This approach, embedded in the post-sovereignty paradigm of the 1990s, has functioned more as a normative project than as an analysis of political reality (Mearsheimer, 2018).

Recent geopolitical developments—the return of great power competition, the militarization of economic security, and the fragmentation of the liberal international order—have exposed the structural limits of this paradigm. Instead of the nation-state’s disappearance, we are witnessing its reconfiguration as the central actor of a democracy in transformation.

2. The return of the nation-state: from normative relic to structural node

In this context, the nation-state is not returning as ideological nostalgia or authoritarian regression, but as a structural actor of democratic metamorphosis. This return does not imply the restoration of absolute sovereignty in the classical sense, but the reconceptualization of state functions in the conditions of an unstable international order and a democracy that is experiencing an ontological transition. The state no longer appears only as a procedural guarantor of the constitutional order, but as a space where tensions between security, sovereignty and democratic legitimacy are confronted, negotiated and reconfigured.

This transformation is clearly illustrated by the response of democratic states to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a moment of systemic crisis, even the most economically integrated democracies were forced to restore state control over borders, supply chains, health policies and strategic production

capacities. The decisive decision-making was not carried out by markets or abstract transnational mechanisms, but by states, which once again became the guarantors of collective survival and public trust. Democracy, in this case, was based not on the minimization of the state, but on its ability to act.

A second representative example is Russia’s war against Ukraine, which has brought territorial security and military defense back to the center of European democratic politics. Decisions such as the drastic increase in the defense budget in Germany (*Zeitenwende*), the militarization of European industrial policy, and the state coordination of economic sanctions show that democracies cannot survive without the state’s capacity to exercise power. In this context, the nation-state appears as the node through which democracy is protected from existential threats, rather than as an obstacle to it.

The paradigmatic shift in economic and technological policies also confirms this return. Massive state subsidy programs in the US (Inflation Reduction Act), the industrial policies of the United Nations In all these cases, the nation-state does not operate as an absolute sovereign, but as a coordinating node between society, the economy and the international order. Democracy is not displaced beyond the state, but is reshaped within it. It is here that it becomes clear that the current crisis of democracy does not stem from the “excess of the state”, but from its functional weakening. The return of the nation-state is, in this sense, a prerequisite for the reconstruction of a democracy that is able to cope with uncertainty, conflict and historical responsibility. The E-market for chips and energy, as well as the control of strategic investments, prove that the free market is no longer perceived as a sufficient self-regulating mechanism. The state has returned as a strategic planner, not to replace democracy, but to make it functional in conditions of geopolitical rivalry. In all these cases, the nation-state does not operate as an absolute sovereign, but as a coordinating node between society, the economy and the international order. Democracy does not move beyond the state, but is reshaped within it. It is here that it becomes clear that the current crisis of democracy does not stem from the “excess of the state”, but from its functional weakening. The return of the nation-state is, in this sense, a prerequisite for the reconstruction of a democracy that is able to cope with uncertainty, conflict and historical responsibility.

2.1 The Case of Albania & Kosova as a Micro-Laboratory of Democratic Metamorphosis

The Albanian case, with two formally separate but historically, socially and geopolitically interdependent states, offers a unique micro-laboratory to observe the

return of the nation-state as a structural actor of democracy in transformation. Albania and Kosova are not simply the peripheries of a European democratic order, but spaces where tensions between limited sovereignty, international security and democratic legitimacy appear in condensed form.

In Kosova, the state was built from the beginning under conditions of supervised sovereignty, with an institutional architecture designed to guarantee democratic procedures, but not necessarily the capacity for state action. For more than a decade, democracy was reduced to electoral ritual and the technical management of pluralism, while the real functions of the state – the rule of law, control of territory, the fight against oligarchic capture – remained fragmented. This is a typical example of what can be called procedural democracy without a functional state.

The recent crisis of electoral credibility, including suspicions of vote manipulation within political entities and attempts to delegitimize the electoral process, has clearly exposed this structural gap. Reactions such as the intervention of the prosecutor's office in Prizren are not simply technical acts of justice, but signs of a return of the state as a normative authority. At this point, the state does not act to protect the political status quo, but to reestablish the boundary between democratic conflict and the criminalization of politics. This represents precisely the moment when democracy moves from formal administration to substantial protection.

Albania also represents another variant of the same metamorphosis. After a long period in which the state was perceived mainly as an instrument of clientelistic capture and informal management of power, international pressure and the need for regional stability have forced the Albanian state to reconceptualize its role as a guarantor of order and security. The reform of the judiciary, despite its limitations and tensions, is the most significant example of this effort to reconstruct state authority as a condition for functional democracy.

In both cases, Albania and Kosova are not moving towards a post-sovereign model, but towards a functional sovereignty, limited by international alliances, but necessary for democratic survival. Here it becomes clear that without a state capable of action, democracy is reduced to rhetoric; while without democracy, the state risks slipping into authoritarianism. The democratic metamorphosis occurs precisely in this tension.

In this sense, the Albanian space also takes on a special geopolitical dimension. Albania and Kosova constitute the operational depth of NATO and the US in Southeast Europe. This positioning is not only military, but also political: it requires functional, stable and legitimate states. Albanian democracy cannot survive as a weak institutional project in a militarized geopolitical environment. Therefore, the return of the state as a structural actor is not an ideological luxury, but a strategic necessity.

The Albanian/Kosovar case thus shows that the return of the nation-state is not a regression, but a condition for democratic emancipation. It proves that 21st century democracy cannot function without a state that has the capacity to act, to impose the law and to manage risk. Precisely for this reason, this Balkan micro-laboratory makes visible what in the great Western centers often remains hidden: that the metamorphosis of democracy passes through the reconstruction of the nation-state, not beyond it.

3. Sovereign decision and the crisis of procedural liberalism

Carl Schmitt early articulated the fundamental tension between procedural liberalism and real sovereignty, arguing that it is the sovereign who decides on the state of emergency (Schmitt, 1922/2005). Twentieth-century liberal democracy attempted to neutralize this problem through the juridification of politics and the depoliticization of decision-making.

However, the multiple crises of the last decade have brought back to the center precisely what liberalism had tried to exclude: political decision as a sovereign act. Democratic procedures increasingly function in a space where real power operates outside them, exposing the limits of procedural democracy.

4. Democracy as an ontological issue: power, security, and the administration of life

In this sense, the metamorphosis of democracy is not simply institutional, but ontological. Democracy can no longer be reduced to a system of procedural rules, because these procedures operate in a space void of control over the real mechanisms of power.

Michel Foucault argues that contemporary power is no longer located exclusively in formal institutions, but circulates through the dispositifs of security, population management and life control (Foucault, 2007). If democracy does not intervene in these areas, it loses its political character and is transformed into technocratic administration.

5. The nation-state as a negotiating space of democratic sovereignty

The return of the nation-state occurs precisely as an attempt to rearticulate this political capacity. The state regains functions that go beyond the formal guarantee of democratic procedures and becomes the space where the tension between sovereignty, security and new forms of political participation is negotiated.

Without this negotiating space, democracy either degenerates into affective populism or hardens into post-political technocracy—two forms that, while seemingly antagonistic, are essentially symbiotic.

6. The state of emergency: danger or moment of reconfiguration?

Giorgio Agamben has described this dilemma through the concept of the permanent state of emergency, where law remains formal, but politics operates through its suspension (Agamben, 2005). However, contrary to Agamben's pessimistic reading, the democratic metamorphosis should not be understood only as an authoritarian risk, but also as a moment of reconfiguration.

The central question is not whether the state is being strengthened, but whether this strengthening is taking place within or outside a democratic framework.

7. The Nation-State and the Geopolitical Space of Democracy

The change that the international order has been experiencing in the last 15 years is not cyclical, but structural. The neoliberal order, built on the functional separation between the market and politics, on economic interdependence as a mechanism for peace, and on the assumption that globalization is a linear and irreversible process, is shaking at its foundations. What we are seeing is not simply a course correction, but the return of state power as the central category of political and geopolitical organization.

From the perspective of critical geopolitics, the nation-state remains the fundamental node where space, power, and political identity are intertwined (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Democracy does not exist in a normative vacuum, but is always anchored in concrete spaces of sovereignty.

Attempts to universalize democracy by ignoring this dimension have produced weak forms of statehood, dependent democracies, and political systems exposed to external interference.

7.1 The Nation-State after Neoliberalism: From Arbitrator to Actor

In the neoliberal order, the nation-state was conceived primarily as a procedural guarantor: regulator of markets, supervisor of competition, and administrator of macroeconomic stability. Security was delegated (NATO), economic development was privatized, and technology was globalized. This model functioned as long as the geopolitical environment was relatively stable.

Today, this environment has changed radically. Great power competition, the fragmentation of supply chains, the militarization of technology, the transformation of energy and trade into a tool of war, and the return of conventional warfare

in Europe have made it clear that markets are not neutral and globalization is not politically innocent.

In this context, the nation-state is returning not as an ideological relic, but as:

- strategic security actor,
- architect of economic and technological resilience,
- defender of democratic space from external interference.

This is why there is talk today of a "geo-economic paradigm shift": the economy is no longer seen as an autonomous sphere, but as an instrument of power and political survival.

8. Structural Realism and the Limits of Normative Democracy

As structural realism emphasizes, the international order remains anarchic and states remain the main actors of security and survival (Mearsheimer, 2001). Democracy, if detached from this logic, risks becoming an unprotected normative luxury.

In this sense, the nation-state is a prerequisite not only for sovereignty, but also for democratic survival.

8.1 The Geopolitical Space of Democracy: From Normative Universalism to Strategic Functionality

In the post-Cold War liberal order, democracy was treated as an abstract universal value, detached from space, history and real power relations. The experience of the last three decades has shown the limits of this universalism: democracies exported without a functional state, without real sovereignty and without defensive capacities turned out to be fragile, dependent or susceptible to capture. [See: Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria...]

In the new order in formation, democracy is being re-anchored geopolitically [the case of Kosova]. It is being valued not only for its procedures, but above all for its ability to survive under conditions of strategic pressure; then for the capacity it demonstrates to produce security, stability and credibility; for its role in the broader architecture of collective security.

This means that the geopolitical space of democracy is no longer neutral. Democracy exists and consolidates within concrete spaces of power, and where these spaces are fragmented, democracy also remains vulnerable.

8.2 Albania and Kosova: from normative periphery to operational depth

In this reconfiguration, Albania and Kosova are not simply "small democracies in transition", but part of a Euro-

Atlantic operational depth in Southeastern Europe. This space has not only political, but also military (NATO), energy and infrastructure, technological and digital and geostrategic importance in relation to Russia, China and Turkey.

The political and institutional fragmentation of the Albanian space weakens this role. Two separate states, with limited capacities and different dependencies, are more exposed to external pressures and less functional as strategic nodes.

8.3 The Albanian Federation in the geopolitical vortex: from identity ideas to functional solutions

In this context, the Albanian Federation does not appear as a romantic project or as a deviation from the Euro-Atlantic order, but as a logical result of the reconceptualization of the state, democracy and security.

In an order where sovereignty is being restored as a real capacity for action, where democracy is also being measured by its strategic functionality and small and fragmented spaces are losing weight, a federation between political Albania and the Republic of Kosovo would increase state and democratic capacity, not weaken it; would consolidate the Albanian space as a geopolitical node, not as a periphery; it would reinforce the NATO architecture and American interests in the region, offering a more coherent and resilient partner.

In this geopolitical vortex, the Albanian Federation appears as a new form of functional sovereignty, adapted to the realities of the post-neoliberal order: neither a classical isolated nation-state, nor a dispersed post-sovereign space, but a political structure capable of managing security, democracy, and development in an integrated manner.

9. Political Participation and the Reformation of Representation

Liberal procedural democracy was built on the figure of the periodic citizen-voter; contemporary reality produces citizens who are constantly mobilized but excluded from real decision-making. Without a state capable of institutionalizing this political energy, participation is either channeled into destructive forms of antagonism, or dissipates into fragmented activism without structural impact. The nation-state remains, in this context, the only political space where a new equilibrium can be built between classical representation and new forms of participatory democracy. 10. Conclusion: from the “crisis of democracy” to its metamorphosis. Therefore, the return of the nation-state should not be interpreted through the worn-out paradigm of the “crisis of democracy”, but as a sign of an ontological transformation of democracy itself. Democracy is not collapsing; it is changing form. In this process of metamorphosis, the nation-state is not an obstacle, but the structural node where this transformation becomes conceivable and politically feasible. The rebirth of state power is not a return to history, but an adaptation to a

more dangerous and fragmented world. In this world, democracies that do not reconceptualize their relationship with the state, space and power risk remaining empty forms. For the Albanian space, this means that the question is not whether the Albanian Federation is ideologically desirable, but whether it is functionally necessary. And in the logic of the new geopolitical order, the answer is becoming increasingly clear.

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