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Between the Balkans and Europe: The State/Nation Problem in the Post-Yugoslav States

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue will apply Hansen and Waever's state/nation concept to the post-Yugoslav states, thereby attempting to explain their divergence in attitudes towards 'Europe' and in the EU integration process. It will be highlighted that the evolving state- and nation-building processes after the violent break-up of Yugoslavia significantly deviated in the post-Yugoslav states, with some countries focusing strongly on portraying themselves as Continental European states (Slovenia and Croatia), while others struggled with the establishment of new statehood (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, North-Macedonia).

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Introduction

There has been a growing body of literature looking at the connection between state- and nation-building and the process of European integration in the post-Yugoslav states¹ (Bieber 2012; Elbasani 2013; Keil and Arkan 2015; Noutcheva 2012; Radeljić 2013; Lemay-Hébert 2009). While these studies differ in their focus and content, they reach similar conclusions: the process of EU integration is particularly challenging for the post-Yugoslav states (and for the EU), and current approaches used by the EU to support future enlargement are continuously contested and challenged (Subotić 2011; Džankić, Keil, and Kmezić 2019).

This Introduction to the Special Issue aims to provide an explanatory pattern for the growing contestation and complexity of the EU integration process in relation to the Western Balkans (Belloni 2016). While many analysts focus on the split identity, different roles and institutional impediments of the EU itself (Cebeci 2020; Elgström and Smith 2006; Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017), we move in the other direction. We argue that resistance and friction in the EU enlargement process can be explained by examining the state/nation relations in the post-Yugoslav states. In doing so, we reveal how the agency of these countries vis-à-vis Europe in general and European integration in particular is created, enforced or undermined through its own internal dynamics and in response to external factors. The theory that we employ is based on the research of Ole

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Wæver and Lene Hansen (2002) on *European Integration and National Identity* to the post-Yugoslav states. As Hansen states ‘[i]f we wish to fully understand the [...] reluctance towards European integration we need, as a consequence, to study the way in which the political concepts of “nation” and “state” are deployed in the debate on Europe’ (Hansen 2002, 2). Building on their work, which used the Nordic countries of Finland, Denmark, Norway and Iceland as case studies, we aim to look at the ‘state’ and ‘nation’ concepts and their relations to the idea of Europe in the case of the post-Yugoslav states. What we find is a complex picture of relations, discourses and even contradictions, which explain not only the practical hurdles the enlargement process has faced in recent years, but also allows for the conclusion that the future integration of those post-Yugoslav states that are not yet members of the EU will remain challenging, multifaceted, and overshadowed by wider debates on statehood and the concept of the nation.

In order to do this, the article proceeds in three steps. In the first part, we introduce Wæver’s and Hansen’s concept. Secondly, we apply it more generally to the post-Yugoslav states – the big picture – to indicate trends and developments in this region. Finally, we demonstrate how applying this concept opens the door for wider research and deeper discussions on questions related to statehood and nationhood and their relevance for the EU enlargement process – something which is picked up in the following articles in this Special Issue, in which the state/nation relationship is revisited and framed within the European discourse in all of the post-Yugoslav states.

The nation, the state and Europe

The emergence of social constructivist theorizing in International Relations (IR) in the 1990s has been bringing about the merits of building inter-disciplinary bridges to area studies, comparative politics, history and cultural studies. For instance, theories of nationalism (Özkirimli 2017) have inspired research in sociology, history, and ethnicity studies (e.g. Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Smith 1986), but led a niche existence in comparative politics and IR. Yet, modernist variants of nationalism, in particular, can easily be integrated into social constructivist theory in IR. The integrative argument is particularly evident for the extensive research on national identity. As one of the most prominent in-roads of the social constructivist research agenda (Berenskoetter 2010), it differs from other identity approaches in two ways. First, it takes a clear-cut ‘national’ i.e. domestic perspective, which deviates from systemic understandings of identity (e.g. Wendt 1999). For instance, while systemic theories such as Wendt’s ‘cultures of anarchy’ point at identity conflicts between states (the international level), societal approaches explore identity problems within states i.e. on the national level (e.g. Hopf 2002 for Russia). Second, it understands identity as a primarily collective rather than individual phenomenon (e.g. Bergbauer 2017). National identity as a collective phenomenon derives from social psychology and means ‘images of individuality and distinctiveness (‘selfhood’) held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant “others”’ (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996, 59). As Hansen and Wæver (2002) have observed, a national identity approach looks promising when it comes to explaining the broad outlook and peculiarities of European foreign policies. They conceptualized a theory, which is apt to comprehend commonalities and differences of the Nordic countries with regards to European integration.² In

the core of their explanation lies the state/nation-state/nation relationship, which helps to understand why some countries feel affected by European integration while others do not (Hansen 2002, 1). This is the central assumption societal constructivist research approaches such as Hansen and Wæver's lean towards: the domestic sphere of ideas, institutions and identity determines which international relations problems are perceived to be relevant and in which way. Epistemologically, their argument is constitutive and structural (cf. Wendt 1998), rather than causal:

The basic thesis is that although not every single decision fits the pattern to be expected from the structures (...) there is sufficient pressure from the structures that policies do turn within a certain, specified margin onto the tracks to be expected. (Wendt 1998, 28)

The 'European question' of the post-Yugoslav states may serve as a prime example here.

To make use of Hansen and Wæver's theory as a 'travelling concept' for the post-Yugoslav states seems rewarding since one observes similar conditions in comparison to Nordic countries: different approaches to Europe and the EU, different security policies, many similarities with regard to culture, including a common ('we') feeling for the post-Yugoslav states³ region, which politically became the 'Western Balkans'.

National identity deals with the spoken word, and the performance through speech acts. This follows Wæver's methodological preference for discourse analysis. Here, the post-structuralist character of the approach becomes evident renouncing exogenous factors such as power or cost-benefit calculations (Hansen 2002, 4). As an ontological consequence, the study can pay tribute to the idiosyncrasies of the respective foreign policies. In each country under study, the state/nation relationship is somewhat unique – we may only cluster them with the help of other real types which serve as focal points for the analysis.

At the same time, Wæver's (2002) concept of discourse analysis turns out to be demanding. Firstly, the proposed three-layer concept requires sophisticated methodological treatment. Secondly, to grasp discourse as 'a flow of arguments through time' makes it difficult to know where to start with the analysis and where to end. Additionally, the relevant text corpus seems unfixed and potentially infinite.⁴ Yet, the abundant conceptional apparatus calls for a 'pragmatic stance' (Wæver 2002, 42) which might bear some advantages. It leaves some room and some 'creative moment' (Wæver 2002, 41) to the authors to select the 'difficult situations' of their respective country. Finally, it is important to point out that the post-Yugoslav states are still not consolidated, that their transitional processes remain 'unfinished business' (Jović 2022, 194–195), their state/nation concepts remain embattled, their understanding of Europe in flux, and their place in the EU variable, either as potential candidates, candidate countries, or member states.

The three-layer model

The **first and deepest layer** entails the core state/nation relationship of a country (Wæver 2002, 33–34): 'what is the idea of the state, what is the idea of the nation, and how are the two tied together?' Wæver proposes a 'tool-box' comprising some theoretical questions guiding the analysis (Wæver 2002, 37). The first touches upon the relationship between 'nation' and 'state' in a narrow sense. The spectrum of state/nation relationships is possibly marked by the French model, on the one hand, and the German model on the other (Brubaker 2009). In the French case, state-building preceded nation-building and the

belonging to a nation is closely linked to the membership of the state ('civic nationalism'). Typically, nationhood and citizenship rests on civic virtues, which reside within the state. As Wæver suggests, this identity construction largely affects France's attitude vis-à-vis Europe. In one way, Europe may remain (identity-wise) outside France – the EU would then represent a mere political stage on which France acts. The second option means to 'double', or rather to project French values to the EU. Finally, there is the option to fuse the EU and France; the EU would then represent the ideals of the French revolution. In France, the *nouveaux philosophes* may subscribe to this identity construction making up an 'idealist discursive formation'.

At one end of the state/nation spectrum we find states in search of a nation such as the historical pre-revolutionary France. At the other end, we find the German model with German history boiled down to 'a nation searching for a state'. Usually, such a nation defines itself as 'Kulturnation' which is made up by its people and specific artifacts of arts, music, and architecture. Membership of the nation is defined by ancestry ('by blood') and can, hence, not be easily changed. The state in the German case, Wæver (2002, 35) holds, can be understood as being separate from the nation. The relations to Europe can take shape in a more flexible way – compared to France – combining some forms of 'Kulturnation' with some form of power-state. Moreover, one should take into consideration the external dimension of the relationship: To what extent and how is the respective state/nation construction projected to the world? Furthermore, comparative analyses of discourses in European identity studies have indeed shown the relevance of 'introverted' and 'extraverted' national identities (Stahl 2003, 376). Additionally, the self-concept of a nation might be complemented by 'attachments' (Wæver 2002, 36), e.g. *la patrie* in the French case.

The **second layer** focuses on the state/nation relationship towards Europe. To what extent and how is the special construction of state/nation linked to 'Europe' (Wæver 2002, 37–38)? Recalling the constitutive attribute of the theory, the fusion of state/nation in the French case does not necessarily lead to a neatly defined policy in the EU. Nor does Germany's loosely coupled state/nation concept determine specific outcomes at the EU level. Rather, it can be argued that the stage- and projection-related problems France is facing are more serious than Germany's since the latter has relatively more extensive room for manoeuvre. Moreover, the meaning of 'Europe' plays a role (Wæver 2002, 38). The European nations attach very different meanings to 'Europe' and attribute different roles to it, as is also visible in the case studies on this Special Issue (see below). Overall, the theory postulates that ideational structures of the first level (the state/nation concept) affect the second (the relationship towards Europe). As our study is apt to demonstrate, this is particularly the case when it comes to new or contested states in the Western Balkans.

Finally, the **third layer** covers the concrete policy level (Wæver 2002, 38ff). On this level, political actors i.e. mostly political parties and key political elites pursue different policies for and vis-à-vis Europe. They, involuntarily but inevitably, do so by employing the constellations of the second and first level. For sure, those policies are as embattled as the underlying constructions are. The ensuing political debates may cover different identity constructions as well as different discussions regarding the arguments' 'fit' to European integration demands. The three levels are characterized by an increasing dynamic. While the state/nation concept rarely changes, identity turns in the relationship towards Europe may occur in the medium run. The concrete policies, though, may change

quickly. This is why this level represents the most dynamic of the model. Yet all policy options available and thinkable at this level depend on the constructions of the previous levels (Wæver 2002, 40). One implication deserves attention here. Even though a government has been pursuing policies well in line with the respective national identity, the policy may nevertheless crash due to the policies of other states or EU requirements. In that case, Wæver assumes a discursive re-launch: ‘the politicians would have (...) to ‘go one level down’, pick up the concept of state/nation and give it different articulation, which could easily mean very different policies on level 3’ (Wæver 2002, 40). So it has to be noted, that concrete policies could drastically fail – lost wars are a case in point here. In such an instance, new policies would be tried which feeds back on the construction of Europe and maybe even on the state/nation concept.

These implications raise an interesting question on the ability of political actors to focus on policies beyond the construction of the deeper layers outlined above, especially considering the ‘power of the executive’. Yet this argument needs heroic assumptions if we take the politicians’ desire to be re-elected, the basic principle of representation and the ‘goodness of fit’ argument into account (Risse 2001, 202). Following the latter, a politician or a party runs the risk of defeat and marginalization if it proposes policies which are out of kilter with the respective national identity:⁵ ‘we would expect it to meet with fierce resistance’ (Wæver 2002, 40). So overall, the state/nation concept represents identity-bound constraints which limit the foreign policy possibility space. Hence, the policies on level three would represent, *grosso modo*, the dominant state/nation constructions of the deeper levels. This has further implications for the regional system. It means that ‘(e)ach country constructs in principle its own Europe on the basis of its individual constellations of state and nation’ (Wæver 2002, 39). These idiosyncratic state/nation concepts lead to different meanings of Europe. One might add here that this is why the Eurobarometer data on attitudes on Europe only tell a rather superficial story since the polls do not reveal which ‘Europe’ is meant by the respondents. Consequently, all European policies of the states under study are different ‘by nature’. In contrast to most liberal understandings of the EU project, Wæver holds that these differences do not necessarily pose a threat to integration. When looking at the policy layer, we would therefore not expect harmonious policies between the post-Yugoslav states. Rather, we ask whether and to what extent they are compatible with each other. It is this compatibility, which would allow for a straightforward accession on the one hand, and peaceful neighbourly relations in the Yugosphere on the other.

The state/nation level in the post-Yugoslav states

When assessing the connection between the state and the nation in the post-Yugoslav states, a complex picture emerges. While some countries, such as Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, fit the traditional concept of a ‘Kulturnation’, in which the nation existed before the state, the other post-Yugoslav states are harder to classify. Kosovo and Montenegro, as mentioned above, and potentially North Macedonia as well, come closest to the concept of French civic nationalism, in which the state preceded a clear national consciousness. Bosnia⁶ is particular in many respects because of its three dominant groups, who all have their own claims to the Bosnian state and the territory in which they live (Pinkerton 2016).

To depict and analyse the state/nation concept, a historical perspective is at times most useful. All of the post-Yugoslav states are young states, even those that have existed in one way or another before the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Some, such as Kosovo, Bosnia and Macedonia, have never existed as states before their recent declarations of independence. Others, such as Serbia and Croatia have a history of independence that precedes Yugoslavia (in the case of Serbia), and was based on territorial autonomy during the reign of Great Powers (Slovenia and Croatia, for example) (Calic 2010; Glenny 2000). The nations of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, along with Albanians particularly in Albania but also in Kosovo, have substantially been influenced by the French revolution and the demand for national self-determination, which was only granted to Serbia after the Congress of Vienna (and fully in 1867). The other nations that founded their own states after the dissolution of Yugoslavia had their national status recognized after World War I (for Croats and Slovenes), and finally after World War II as a result of Tito's complex nationality policy, which included the recognition of Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnian Muslims, Macedonians and Montenegrins as constituent nations, and Albanians as a national minority (Banac 1984; Đokić 2003; Jović 2009). While Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia made it very clear that their post-war states after the dissolution of Yugoslavia would be nation-states, i.e. designed to territorially represent one constituent nation, this was much harder to do for the other states in the region. In Serbia, this resulted in an understanding of the need to unite all Serbs in one state, which was envisaged under Slobodan Milošević in the Yugoslav wars in Croatia and Bosnia (Judah 2000). In Croatia, too, this resulted in the expulsion of large parts of the Serb minority and attempts by Croats in Bosnia (with the support of Croatia) to combine the Croat-inhabited territories in Bosnia with Croatia (Zakošek 2008; Hoare 1997). In Slovenia, this did not lead to the violent expulsion of others, but to the restricted citizenship policies of the newly independent Slovenian state, which excluded many non-Slovene ethnic groups (Stiks 2015).

The image is more complex when looking at Bosnia, due to the existence of three main nations in its territories – two of which have their kin-states as neighbouring states and were engaged in projects of secession and integration into the kin-states during the conflict between 1992 and 1995. For Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks), Bosnia is their home, they have no kin-state as such (despite the Serb attribution of Turkey as their kin-state), and therefore connect to Bosnia not just as a place of residence, as is the case for Serbs and Croats in Bosnia, but as a national home, as their nation-state. Their understanding of Bosnia is not as exclusive as can be seen in Serbia and Croatia particularly, which is a result of the existence of three large sized groups who lay claim to Bosnia as their homeland (Donia and Fine 1994).

In North Macedonia, a strong case can be made that while a Macedonian nation was recognized under Tito's Yugoslavia, the process of nation-building intensified and came to fruition only after the independence of the country, and the challenges to this independence particularly by Greece in relation to the name issue (Ristovski 1999). Likewise, Montenegro engaged in nation-building before it became independent, but the push for a separate (i.e. separate from the Serb nation) Montenegrin nation only occurred once the country gained independence in 2006 (Morrison 2009). In Kosovo, the focus was on creating a civil state to ensure minority inclusion, not least because of the substantial international involvement in post-war Kosovo's independence (Krasniqi 2012; Keil 2017; Chandler 2019).

What is more, the complex power-sharing systems that were established in Bosnia, North Macedonia and Kosovo further institutionalized ethnicity (Bieber 2004), thereby ensuring that these states were recognized as a multinational home to numerous groups who own a stake in the state and declare it their national homeland.

What the articles in this Special Issue highlight, however, is that identity questions turn out to be particularly challenging in those states where either the nation exceeds the boundaries of the state (for example Serbia and the Serbs, Croatia and the Croats), or where the nation (and that is the dominant nation within a state) is challenged by other nations within the same political space, as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in North Macedonia. On the other side, we also have a situation where the state is conceived beyond the nation, as Džankić, Mladenov, and Stahl (2023) highlight in this Special Issue in relation to Serbia's projection of Kosovo.

The state/nation concept and its relation to Europe

To assess the role of 'Europe' and the concept of the European Union in the state/nation relations in the post-Yugoslav states, it is important to start with pointing out that the people in all seven post-Yugoslav countries identify as Europeans and see their own country as a European country. This notion of 'Europeanness' is, however, differently expressed in the seven countries, and has undergone fundamental changes in some of them.

In Montenegro and Kosovo, the two youngest states of the former Yugoslavia, European integration is a stated commitment and aim in the countries' constitutions, while Slovenia's commitment towards Europe and EU integration was not only manifested in multiple foreign policy strategies, but was also linked to establishing itself as an independent and 'normal' country (Hansen 1996, 463). In Croatia, too, independence was seen as a 'return to Europe', which was further facilitated to the extensive contacts between Western Europe due to trade and diaspora interactions, and a history of membership in the Habsburg Empire (Razsa and Lindstrom 2004). However, while Slovenia sustained its commitment to Europe and EU integration, and intensified it through concrete policies such as discussing membership in the Visegrad Group, applying (and failing) for membership in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, and engaging in negotiations for an Europe Agreement (Bojinović 2005), Croatia moved 'away' from Europe in the second half of the 1990s. While Slovenia engaged in a process of 'Othering' towards the Balkans and the other post-Yugoslav states (Bojinović Fenko 2010), Croatia actively practised 'Othering' towards Europe, as a result of intensified EU criticism of Tujman's increased authoritarianism (Jović 2006). This 'Othering' changed only when Tudjman died and a new government formed in Croatia in 2000, at which point a re-orientation both towards Europe and EU membership can be observed (Bojinović Fenko, Keil, and Šelo Šabić 2023). However, as indicated in the article, more recently we are seeing how the unconsolidated state/nation constellation continues to affect Croatian foreign policy, both towards the EU and its position in enlargement policy and towards neighbouring Bosnia in particular.

The relationship towards Europe is much more complicated in the case of North Macedonia and Serbia. While they both see themselves as European countries, in North Macedonia, the Greek policy towards the name 'Republic of Macedonia' which has limited Macedonia's ability to move ahead in the EU integration process until 2019 and has

resulted in a Greek veto on Macedonia's membership in NATO, has also had a profound impact on Macedonian attitudes towards Europe. While the Greek actions are seen as 'Un-European' by many Macedonians, the inability of the EU and other European countries to move beyond the name issue has had a profound impact on the role of Europe in the state/nation relationship (Ragaru 2008). There are no doubts about North Macedonia's belonging to European culture and history, but the ongoing discussions with Bulgaria, and the deep divisions over Macedonian history substantially affect the state/nation relationship and attitudes over Europe, as can be seen in the more Euro-sceptical discourse of former Macedonian Prime Minister Gruevski (who served from 2006 to 2016, and became more Eurosceptic after 2010). However, since the arrival of a new government in 2017, a fundamental change can be observed in the country, most commonly demonstrated by an agreement with Greece on the solution of the name dispute, North Macedonia's admittance to NATO and its restarting the effort of EU integration through the opening of membership negotiations in 2020 (Koneska, Huskić, and Krasniqi 2023).

In Montenegro and Kosovo on the other hand, Europe is seen not only as the ultimate destiny for these countries, but it is also seen as a 'midwife' in the process of becoming independent. European countries, and the EU as a whole played an important role in the independence of Montenegro, and since independence, European integration, as well as NATO membership (achieved in 2017), have become the most important issues in Montenegrin foreign policy (Džankić 2014). Likewise, Kosovo's understanding of state and nation is linked to the idea of independence within Europe, with membership in the EU as a key aim of Kosovar independence. EU integration is also seen as a key step to unite the Albanian nation in one polity, as it will bring Albanians from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia together. What is more, the EU has played an important role in Kosovo's post-independence development as a key actor to oversee the independence and the political process, a role it also played in post-war Bosnia. Hence, the process of state-building and nation-building after independence in Kosovo and Bosnia has been substantially influenced by the presence of key European actors on the ground in these countries. These actors have substantially contributed to state-building by focusing on certain aspects of institutional reform, but they have also influenced the wider discourse on EU integration in the two countries. Of course, Bosnia is different from Kosovo in two important aspects: it is not contested by some EU Member States (Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Cyprus have not recognized Kosovo), and Bosnia is a multinational state, so its power-sharing system focuses on the cooperation of the three main national groups. While all these groups by and large support Bosnia's integration into the EU (Huskić 2015), there remain important differences between them. Bosniaks and Croats feel generally more committed to EU integration and the need for further reform to achieve this goal. Particularly for Bosnian Croats, EU integration is also seen as a way of unification with Croatia.

This discourse is only partially replicated by the Serb population in Bosnia, who majorly continue to support the idea of secession and unification with Serbia. This aligns with Serbia's complex relation towards Europe, which is often seen in contrast to its commitment to the 'Yugosphere' – a commitment first seen in the 1980s by calls for Serb domination in Yugoslavia, then manifested through the policies of the Milošević regime and the aim to unite all Serbs in one state, and finally embraced at the moment by Serbia's

ambiguous relationship with Kosovo (Lampe 2000; Ramet 2006). Serbia sees itself as a European state, but also a state anchored in the tradition and history of the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia (Džankić, Mladenov, and Stahl 2023). It is committed (at least rhetorically) to the process of EU integration, but it has not yet given up or recognized Kosovo's statehood – this is still seen as an essential element of Serbian nation- and statehood (Mladenov 2014).

What emerges from this short discussion of the state/nation concept and its relation to Europe is a complex picture. While all seven post-Yugoslav states see themselves as European states, the concepts of Europe are different, and at times contradictory. For example, for Kosovo, Europe means both independence and unification of the Albanian people, while for Serbia, it is seen as a way of regaining its status as a regional power in the Balkans. For Bosnia and Kosovo, Europe is seen as the blessed future, that justifies important state-building measures, including those imposed by outsiders. Kosovo faces contestation of its statehood and identity by key European actors (as North Macedonia did before the solution to the name conflict with Greece), which in turn affects its state/nation relation to the concept of Europe and European identity. Croatia first embraced the return to Europe, before portraying Europe as an enemy of the Croat people, that left them alone in the moment of need during the Croat Homeland War (Jović 2012), while Slovenia was very strongly focused and committed to its alignment with Europe and used this to distance itself from the Balkans as a region, a memory and a discourse (Bojnovic Fenko and Šabić 2014). In Serbia, the role of Europe remains contested and conflicting with the idea of the 'Yugosphere' – as narratives about Serb unification clash with dominant discourses on Serbian dominance and regional power ambitions.

These different and at times changing conceptions of Europe in the state/nation alignment have had a profound impact on the policies of these countries towards the EU and its Member States. It should not be forgotten that integration into the EU also requires a reconceptualization of the state/nation relationship, as sovereignty is pooled to a supra-national body. Moreover, countries join an exclusive club, which certainly in the cases of Slovenia and Croatia has been defined as their full achievement of national independence, as highlighted by Bojinović Fenko, Keil, and Šelo Šabić (2023). The irony is that whilst these states are young and undergoing complex processes of state- and nation-building, they are also engaging in the process of defining and re-defining their relationship with Europe (and the EU) through the enlargement process, where EU membership is seen as a concrete and ultimate goal in the post-independence development of these countries. These concrete policies, and their influence on wider redefinitions will be discussed in the next section.

Policies towards the EU

The different experiences and developments during and shortly after the break-up of Yugoslavia have resulted in very different paths towards European integration. Slovenia, a mature nation-state and liberal democracy, tended to emphasize its nature as a Central European rather than Balkan/South-European state strongly in the post-independence period (Bojnovic Fenko and Šabić 2014). Consequently, it could take the 'fast track' to the EU and joined the union as the only post-Yugoslav state in the 'big bang' in 2004. Indicators on the policy level are its inclusion into Southeast European (SEE) post-conflict

institutions, Official Development Assistance and EU-SEE bridge-building efforts. In Croatia, however, the non-saturated nation-state of the 1990s meant that the prospect of EU integration remained politically contested at the time; its actions towards Serbs in Croatia and its support for secessionist Croats in Bosnia brought it into international isolation in the second half of the 1990s. A different policy needs another construction of Europe and sometimes even another state/nation concept to base it on. Croatia's turn towards EU integration after 2000 is the result of changes at the second level – namely a re-definition of the role of Europe in relation to the state/nation concept affected a change in the country's policies towards the EU and a renewed commitment to EU integration, as highlighted by Bojinović Fenko, Keil, and Šabić (2023) in this Special Issue. When Tudjman died in 1999 and the HDZ lost power in 2000 a fundamental re-orientation of Croatian foreign policy became possible, which emphasized the importance of Euro-Atlantic integration and Croatia's return as a respected member of the international community. Croatia's foreign policy goals were then clearly embedded in the transatlantic and EU community (Šelo Šabić 2014, 84–86). However, the article in this Special Issue also demonstrates that this second level change is also inherently linked to an unconsolidated state/nation relation that has recently become vital when aiming to explain Croatia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the state/nation constructions are very limited, so are the promising policy options, which can be realistically pursued on the 3rd level. In this vein, the ongoing societal contestation has manifested in problems with the ICTY and reforming the judiciary in the enlargement process. That even the states of Slovenia and Croatia are not entirely saturated in terms of recognized borders is demonstrated by the struggle over the Piran Bay (Bickl 2017), in which Slovenia and Croatia have been arguing over access to the Adriatic Sea. Moreover, more recent direct and indirect irredentist claims by Bosnian Croat elites, as well as support for alternative visions of EU enlargement and reorganization in the Balkans (so-called non-paper on the redrawing of borders along ethnic lines) have questioned both Slovenia's and Croatia's commitment to EU priorities and foreign policy in the Western Balkans and beyond.

The state/nation problem triggered more severe consequences for Serbia's European affairs. As a pariah state in the 1990s, the country became *de facto* isolated in the international community. By force, by referendum, and by negotiations it had to change its statehood four times after the demise of Yugoslavia. As a result, the turn to Europe remained a contested issue in Serbia which, in turn, led to a rather erratic Europeanization (Mladenov and Stahl 2015, 134). It was only when the European Commission conditioned progress in the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) with the cooperation regarding the ICTY, that Serbian governments decided to extradite war criminals. Additionally, the ongoing dispute over Kosovo was even instrumentalized by Serbia in the 2000s to press the EU for more benefits (Stahl 2011). Yet – despite the fact that a very nationalist party rules the country – the government promised more integration efforts and demonstrated flexibility regarding border issues in Kosovo and the handling of the migration crisis in 2015. So in the Serbian case, the state/nation concept entails identity-bound constraints which limit the country's possibility space: Giving up Kosovo is not simply a choice for Serbian elites in favour of EU integration. Instead, it is a clash of the contrasting state/nation concept and the understanding of Europe, which results in a lack of progress in EU integration (Džankić, Mladenov, and Stahl 2023).

If Serbia equals a strong nation seeking a state, Montenegro might be called a state seeking a nation. After the *de facto* autonomy of Montenegro in the aftermath of the Yugoslavian wars the country's 'creeping independence' finally resulted in the secession from the state union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006. In society, different state/nation related cleavages came to the fore which led to debates not only on independence but also on NATO membership (Džankić 2013). Regarding EU membership, though, the two main political camps could agree on EU integration as a top priority (Džankić 2014) which largely explains why Montenegro could start negotiations and has become the front-runner of the remaining 'pre-ins', although more recently this process has come to a halt as a result of the authoritarian turn of the Montenegrin government, a development that can also be observed in Serbia in recent years (Bieber 2020).

More problematic are the EU perspectives of Bosnia, and Kosovo. In Bosnia, three nations – and one might add even more smaller minorities – are seeking a state. While the Bosnian Croats and Serbs could rely on mighty kin-states in the war, the (relative majority population of the) Bosniaks had to fight for survival. Despite the fact that the kin-states have officially abandoned their claims *vis-à-vis* Bosnia the constitution of Bosnia–Herzegovina remains heavily contested. When Bosnia started the SAA in 2005, there were high hopes that the looming EU identity may heal the Bosnian identity problem (Perry 2015, 179). Yet the state/nation crisis impeded any implementation of significant SAA reforms – the country is blocking itself in the enlargement process. The main achievements of post-war reforms in the country were imposed by the High Representative bypassing the ethnonationalist parties in the country (Keil 2013, 183; McCulloch and McEvoy 2019).

Kosovo suffers from internal and external contestedness of its statehood (Hehir 2019). Internally, parts of the Serbian minority never acquiesced to the independent state. Externally, Serbia, China, Russia, and even the above mentioned five EU members do not recognize Kosovo's independence (Keil and Stahl 2022a). Thus, the EU had to declare itself 'status-neutral' on Kosovo. This brings the union into the external dilemma situation to build a state it cannot recognize (Vogel 2009). Moreover, the EU's heavy engagement within Kosovo runs the risk to delegitimize Kosovo's way to democracy and cement 'old' structures and polities (Krasniqi and Musaj 2015).

North Macedonia for a long time also suffered from a double contestedness problem. While the dissatisfaction of the Albanian minority led to serious uprisings (e.g. in 2001), Greece blocked Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU. The latter represented a deep identity conflict around this 'name dispute' which appears hard to resolve (Daskalovski 2017). As a consequence of the blockade, the domestic transition to democracy had staggered and Europeanization came to a halt (Kacarska 2015). The initial consensus on EU membership could not materialize in policies due to that name dispute (Koneska 2014, 118). That deadlocked policies may lead to feedbacks on the state/nation concept is demonstrated by Koneska, Huskić, and Krasniqi (2023) in this Special Issue. The change of actors in December 2018 resulted in shifting policies towards Greece, a solution to the name dispute, and eventually a re-starting of the country's EU integration process through the official initiation of membership negotiations. This does not mean that the agreement, and politics in Macedonia are not contested *per se* (Koneska 2022), but it does highlight that substantial change on all three levels is possible, showing the relevance of the constructivist paradigm in the state/nation concept.

It is also important to keep in mind that the foreign policy process of engagement with the EU is defined by the EU's own enlargement framework. As such, the policies that countries have to adopt and implement are not freely chosen but are predetermined by the EU's guidelines and ultimately its *acquis communautaire*. While the process focuses on the transfer of sovereignty, it nevertheless involves engagement with EU member states and is designed for future member states. This can at times result in conflict, for example when a member state has a bilateral issue with a candidate country, as was the case with Greece and North Macedonia (Keil and Stahl 2022b). What is more, the deep-rooted reforms associated with EU integration can substantially affect the second layer – the very idea of what Europe is and what it means to be European, but it can also affect the first layer, as Džankić, Mladenov, and Stahl (2023) highlight in relation to the EU-sponsored dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, as well as the EU's involvement in the independence of Montenegro.

Conclusions and summary of the special issue

Hansen and Wæver's theory makes the (constitutive) claim that a country's state/nation concept impacts its foreign policy. The interplay between the state/nation concept, the idea of 'Europe' and concrete policies towards the EU in the framework of the enlargement policy is complex, multidimensional and subject to change over time. What we learn from all cases discussed in this Special Issue is that the EU integration of the post-Yugoslav states directly affects their first and second layers of the state/nation concept and the role of Europe. Bojinović Fenko, Keil and Šabič (2023) underline in their discussion of Slovenia and Croatia that these countries focused on a move away from the Balkans to redefine themselves as Central Europeans. Slovenia did so pro-actively and explicitly by joining European forums and de-coupling its foreign policy from the Yugoslosphere. In Croatia, this was more complex, especially after the end of the Balkan war, when European criticism of the Tudjman regime resulted in a redefinition of Europe and a more isolationist foreign policy. However, from 2000 onwards, subsequent Croatian governments prioritized EU integration and the country joined the Union in July 2013, the second of the post-Yugoslav states to become an EU member after Slovenia, which already joined in 2004. Yet, more recent changes in both countries' foreign policies highlight that level 2 and 3 changes are possible, and in the Croatian case also symbolize an unconsolidated state/nation constellation, which severely affects policy options.

Džankić, Mladenov, and Stahl (2023) compare the state/nation concept and its impact on Europe and EU integration in Serbia and Montenegro. They stress the contrast between the Serbian nation-state and the Montenegrin state/nation on the one side, and the differentiating conceptions of Europe on the other. While Montenegro has even before its independence been very positive about the idea of Europe and European integration, this is much more contested in Serbia as a result of the NATO bombing of 1999 and the substantial support from most EU member states for the unilateral independence of Kosovo. This also explained the different trajectories the countries have taken in their EU integration process, with more progress visible in Montenegro due to a stronger commitment to becoming an EU member state.

In the third contribution of this Special Issue, Koneska, Huskić, and Krasniqi (2023) discuss the cases of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. While all three countries

are contested states (both internally and externally), they are also rhetorically positive about EU integration. Yet, different forms of contestation have affected these countries' abilities to progress towards EU membership. Having said this, recent developments in North Macedonia show that change at all three levels is possible, and that ultimately elite commitment is much more important than long historical understandings of identity.

These articles make for a fascinating read about the role of the state/nation concept, the understanding of Europe, and the EU integration process in the post-Yugoslav states. They offer explanations for the different stages of progress in the EU integration process, and they provide further insights into our understandings of politics and identity in the countries that were examined (Kartsonaki and Wolff 2023). What is more, they do not just paint a complex and multidimensional picture, but one that is in flux, one that highlights that identity and definitions of core concepts can change rather rapidly. Here lies the theoretical contribution of this Special Issue – Hansen and Wæver's theory does not travel as easily to the post-Yugoslav states. In young, unconsolidated transitional states, our findings suggest, contested state/nation constellations may change more quickly than in saturated nation-states which seriously affects level 2 and 3 perspectives and policy options. When aiming for an understanding of EU rule, norm and identity adoption in the region, this is vital to keep in mind.

Notes

1. These are Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo.
2. The differences between the Nordic countries are more pronounced than it looks at first glance: While Finland stands for a pro-integrationist stance, Denmark belongs to the most skeptical member states manifested by its Maastricht treaty 'opt-outs'. Iceland and Norway are not members of the EU.
3. After the fall of Yugoslavia, the term 'Yugosphere' came up to address the cultural similarities of the post-Yugoslav states. Since the term is contested and the term 'Western Balkans' was meant to cover all remaining states outside the union including Albania, we stick in the following to the term 'post-Yugoslav states'. We thank one reviewer for alluding us to this point.
4. Related national identity theories – therefore – have introduced 'pre-studies' to limit the discursive space, to down-size the text corpus, and denote the 'privileged storytellers' (Stahl and Harnisch 2009, 37–50).
5. A classic example provides the Danish government's initial approval of the Maastricht treaty in 1991 which had to be re-negotiated after a referendum in 1992. A more recent example poses David Cameron's resignation as Prime Minister when losing the Brexit referendum.
6. For stylistic choices, the short form 'Bosnia' will be used in this text. This always refers to the whole territory of the state Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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