

ETHNICITY, IDENTITY, AND STATE. UNDERSTANDING THE ETHNO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND CONFLICTS

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between ethnicity, identity and the State in a globalised context, focusing on the territorial and geopolitical implications of ethno-political dynamics. It analyzes the concept of minority, considering different definitions and categorization challenges for ethnic, linguistic, or cultural minorities. The interplay between ethnicity and nationalism, dominance of certain ethnic groups, and the role of territorial and diasporic communities are discussed. Emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach, the article highlights the importance of understanding dynamic ethno-cultural identities for global political and geopolitical stability, concluding with the need for diverse perspectives to address challenges of ethnic diversity. The paper advances a spatialised geopolitical interpretation of ethnicity, highlighting the role of territory, scale and spatial relations in reshaping state sovereignty and ethnic conflict dynamics.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Geopolitical Fragmentation; Territorial Identity; State Sovereignty; Ethno-political Dynamics.

1. Introduction

A pioneer in the study of ethnic phenomena, in his analyses found in the draft translated into English as “Ethnic Group” or “Ethnic Community”, Weber (1999 [1922]; Llanque, 2007) considers the sense of belonging related to common ethnic origin as a social construct, driven by the desire to monopolize power and status. Initially, Weber focused on the idea that groups acted as real entities, motivated by the desire to monopolize power and status. This approach reflected a kind of collectivist realism, where groups were seen as concrete actors in society.

Ethnic identity remains a central concept in understanding state structures and conflict dynamics, especially given its fluidity and adaptability across socio-political contexts. While Weber laid the groundwork for examining ethnic identity as a social construct, contemporary research delves deeper into its evolving nature. The dichotomy between primordialist and constructivist perspectives continues to shape debates on nation-building, highlighting the dynamic interplay between ethnicity and nationalism. Such discussions underscore the significance of ethnic identity in both challenging and reinforcing state cohesion (Kaliyev and Ventsel, 2021).

However, over the course of his career, Weber began to distance himself from collectivist concepts. He recognized that treating groups as real entities could be

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limiting and began to view the "group" as a useful construct rather than a concrete entity. This shift reflected a turn towards a more analytical and abstract approach, where groups were seen as conceptual tools for explaining individual and collective behaviour.

In this way, Weber made a significant contribution to the development of sociological theory, showing how concepts and categories can evolve and adapt to provide more precise and in-depth explanations of social phenomena (Banton, 2007). For the analysis of interest, it is crucial to note that a century has passed since the sociologist and economist in "Economy and Society", published posthumously (Weber, 1999 [1922]), prophesied the gradual disappearance of constraints based on ethnic and cultural differentiation, a process stimulated by the creation of universal ties that would impose themselves and overcome the particularisms that characterized previous centuries.

However, it is evident that despite the increasing globalization and internationalization, there is simultaneously a resurgence of ethnic, religious, and group identities. This resurgence reflects the adaptability and dynamic nature of ethnic identities, which remain central to debates on statehood and conflict (Kaliyev and Ventsel, 2021). This phenomenon can be seen as part of a "mass individualism", highlighting the problem of ethnic minorities and their growing social and political impact. It is now a reality that every state contains one or more ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities. However, what is most striking is the emergence of an ethnic revival that transcends borders and geographic limits. This situation poses significant challenges to the traditional concept of the State. State borders, sovereignty, and the legitimization of states are being questioned by supranational, transnational, and subnational forces. In Sub-Saharan Africa, dominant ethnic groups play a pivotal role in shaping state power and identity, highlighting the complex interplay between ethnicity and governance (Green, 2018). In this context, the problem of minorities is not just an internal matter of states but becomes a central issue in the global debate on how nations and communities interact and coexist in an increasingly interconnected and diversified world.

Within this analytical framework, the present paper aims to examine the relationship between ethnicity, identity and the State through a geopolitical and geographical perspective, with particular attention to the territorial implications of ethno-political dynamics. More specifically, it addresses the following research question: how do contemporary configurations of ethnic identity interact with state structures and processes of territorial organisation, contributing to the redefinition of sovereignty and political space?

The article adopts a conceptual and multidisciplinary approach, integrating insights from political geography, geopolitics and sociology in order to develop an interpretative framework capable of capturing the spatial dimension of ethnic phenomena. The empirical references included throughout the paper – such as the Balkans, Sub-Saharan Africa and selected Asian contexts – are used as illustrative examples aimed at highlighting recurring geopolitical patterns rather than as elements of a strictly comparative design.

The contribution of this study lies in advancing a spatialised reading of ethnicity and minority dynamics, emphasising the role of territory, scale and spatial relations in shaping contemporary conflict and governance processes. In this perspective, ethnicity is interpreted not only as a cultural or identity-based factor, but as a structuring element

of geopolitical configurations, capable of influencing both the internal cohesion of states and their position within the global system.

By foregrounding the territorial dimension of ethnic identities, the paper argues that the current transformations of the State cannot be fully understood without considering the interaction between ethno-cultural dynamics and processes of spatial reconfiguration. This approach contributes to bridging the gap between sociological interpretations of ethnicity and geographical analyses of political space, offering a more integrated framework for understanding the evolving relationship between identity, territory and sovereignty.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining geopolitical analysis with sociological and historical perspectives. By integrating these disciplines, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how ethnic identities are shaped by historical processes and contemporary governance structures.

Rather than developing a strictly comparative analysis, the paper adopts a conceptual and interpretative approach aimed at examining the relationship between ethnic conflict dynamics and state structures through a geopolitical and spatial lens. Empirical references to diverse geopolitical and socio-cultural contexts, including Tibet, the Balkans, and Sub-Saharan Africa, are employed as illustrative examples to highlight recurring patterns and territorial dynamics, rather than as elements of a systematic comparative design.

The analysis draws on models of ethnic fractionalisation and pluralist governance to explore how different configurations of diversity and institutional arrangements influence the emergence of nationalist and centre-seeking conflicts (Lange and Jeong, 2024). These theoretical frameworks are used to support a broader reflection on the spatial and political implications of ethnic diversity.

In addition to examining geopolitical dynamics, the research considers strategies for ethnic conflict management and resolution, using selected cases to illustrate best practices and persistent challenges in different contexts. The geopolitical framework is centred on three key analytical dimensions: the identification of spaces and actors, the evaluation of relevant structural and contextual factors, and the analysis of the interconnections between these elements.

Within this framework, space is conceptualised as a dynamic and relational construct, consisting of zones of interest, influence and action shaped by economic, political and security considerations. Particular attention is devoted to the multi-scalar nature of these processes, highlighting how local, national and transnational dynamics interact in shaping ethnic conflicts and governance responses.

The study employs an "impact analysis" approach to assess how intersecting interests among actors—states, ethnic groups and international organisations—inform strategies and policy orientations. This method prioritises qualitative interpretation and analytical flexibility, enabling the exploration of complex interactions and their implications for sovereignty and territorial organisation.

Finally, the methodology integrates a comprehensive document analysis, drawing on academic literature, policy reports and demographic data. This ensures a robust analytical basis for examining both historical and contemporary trends in ethnic conflicts, situating them within broader spatial and temporal transformations. By

combining these approaches, the study provides a coherent framework for interpreting the factors driving ethnic tensions and the evolving responses of states within an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

3. Exploring the Notion of Minority

In the exegetical analysis of the concept of minority, it emerges that the term is neither univocal nor easily definable. Traditionally, it might seem that minority is based on a quantitative criterion, namely the numerical ratio between different components of a state's population. From this perspective, a minority is identified as an ethnic, linguistic, or cultural group numerically inferior to the demographically dominant group. However, this quantitative definition is problematic. Historical examples, such as the political dominance of whites in South Africa or Hutus in Rwanda, demonstrate how numerically smaller groups can exercise dominant political control. Moreover, the quantitative dimension of the minority concept varies greatly, extending from small communities within states (such as Albanians in Italy) to numerically significant groups (such as Hispanics or African Americans in the United States).

From a conceptual perspective, the notion of minority can be examined through different analytical criteria, including quantitative, anthropological and territorial approaches, each of which highlights specific limitations and interpretative challenges. The anthropological criterion, which focuses exclusively on the ethno-cultural substrate, is also questionable. According to this definition, any community could be considered a minority, even those fully integrated into the socio-national fabric.

Social science scholars highlight that the fundamental component of ethnicity is intrinsically subjective and psychological. It is rooted in a sense of identity and belonging perceived by the members of a group, which can become a source of opposition in conflict situations. This perspective suggests that ethnicity, and therefore the concept of minority, is more a lived and perceived experience than an objective and physically measurable reality. Walker Connor (1994; 2004), perhaps the leading scholar on the origins and dynamics of ethnic nationalism, has consistently emphasized its political implications, arguing that Western scholars and policymakers have long underestimated the strength and emotional intensity of ethnonationalism.

The ethnic dimension is considered antecedent to the national by scholars such as Smith (1984; 1998; 2000; 2010), who defines the nation as a pre-political fact. It would therefore be misleading to confuse ethnic groups and nations, as ethnicity represents the cultural base upon which the phenomena of nation and nationalism are constructed. In this perspective, while recognising the modernity of nationalist movements, Smith argues that their resurgence since the late nineteenth century has found fertile ground precisely in the reactivation of ethnic sentiment. His contribution is particularly relevant for shifting attention towards the ethnicity of dominant groups, analysing them as historically constructed entities shaped by specific power relations, cultural narratives and institutional configurations (Kaufmann and Zimmer, 2004).

Some scholars have proposed a geodemographic approach to define the concept of minority, giving importance to the relationship between a community and a specific territory (Lizza, 2008). This criterion focuses on how a population is distributed and interacts with a defined geographic space. However, this perspective also presents significant limitations, as it excludes populations that are not sedentary or do not maintain a fixed territorial bond. Groups such as Jews, Tuaregs and Rom, for instance,

demonstrate how strong cultural, religious and ethnic cohesion can persist independently of stable territorial anchoring.

The challenge, therefore, is to develop a definition of minority capable of encompassing both territorially rooted groups and diasporic or itinerant communities, recognising the plurality of their identities and experiences. In this regard, the definition of ethnic-linguistic minority proposed by Capotorti (1991), in a study commissioned by the United Nations, offers a more balanced and comprehensive approach. By combining objective and subjective elements, the definition identifies minorities as groups numerically inferior and in a non-dominant position, characterised by distinct ethnic, religious or linguistic features and by a shared sense of solidarity aimed at preserving these traits.

Nevertheless, even this definition is not exempt from criticism. One of its main limitations lies in the variability of the elements of differentiation, particularly ethno-cultural belonging, which is deeply dependent on territorial and contextual conditions. Ethnic and cultural identities are inherently dynamic and manifest across multiple spatial scales – from the individual to the global level – as observed by Fouberg and Murphy (2020). This multi-scalar dimension highlights the complexity of the phenomenon and the difficulty of adopting rigid classificatory frameworks.

The limitations of these definitional approaches become particularly evident when observed in concrete geopolitical contexts, where the interaction between identity, territory and governance produces complex and often contradictory outcomes. In Tibet and Xinjiang, for instance, state-led policies of cultural assimilation have intensified ethnic tensions, highlighting the central role of governance in shaping conflict trajectories (Hillman and Tuttle, 2016). Restrictions on language and religious practices, coupled with attempts to integrate local populations into dominant cultural frameworks, have exacerbated grievances and reinforced resistance dynamics. Similarly, the reliance on advanced surveillance technologies in Xinjiang reveals the intersection between ethnic governance and digital control, raising broader questions related to digital sovereignty.

Comparable complexities emerge in the Balkans, where post-conflict denial narratives continue to hinder reconciliation processes and undermine long-term stability (Rácz, 2015). The persistence of contested memories and the limited effectiveness of transitional justice mechanisms illustrate the challenges of rebuilding social cohesion in ethnically fragmented contexts. In Serbia, for example, denial of war crimes has impeded reconciliation, whereas localised initiatives based on truth-telling and recognition have shown more promising results.

Further evidence is provided by the Javakhk region in Georgia, where the interaction between local ethnic identities and national governance structures highlights the fragility of state cohesion in multiethnic settings (Ter-Matevosyan and Currie, 2018). These cases collectively demonstrate how local dynamics intersect with broader processes of globalisation, where transnational influences and internal grievances converge, reinforcing the need for inclusive and territorially sensitive governance strategies (Green, 2018).

Understanding these phenomena therefore requires a multidisciplinary approach capable of integrating different theoretical perspectives and analytical scales. The complexity of ethnic identities, their continuous evolution and their interaction with spatial and political structures demand flexible interpretative frameworks. The challenge lies in balancing the need for conceptual clarity with the recognition of the

dynamic and relational nature of ethnicity, which remains a central factor in contemporary geopolitical transformations.

4. Ethnic-Linguistic Minorities and the Unitary State: Navigating Complexities

The issue of ethnic-linguistic minorities, when related to the concept of the unitary State, may generate internal divisions with potentially significant territorial consequences. The degree of state cohesion plays a crucial role in this regard: the lower the level of cohesion, the greater the likelihood of fragmentation and territorial rupture. This dynamic is clearly illustrated by the European context of the late twentieth century, where countries such as Hungary and Poland exhibited very high cohesion indices (96), in contrast to more fragile configurations such as Czechoslovakia (51) and Yugoslavia (25), ultimately leading to markedly different political-territorial outcomes following the Velvet Revolution and the Balkan conflicts (Kosinski, 1969). From an analytical perspective, evaluating the cohesion of a State requires consideration of multiple factors, including the balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces, institutional stability, and socio-political integration. Quantitative indicators, such as those related to “country risk”, can complement qualitative geopolitical analyses, offering additional insights into the potential for instability and internal conflict, as highlighted by reports produced by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2024).

The geopolitical landscape became significantly more complex in the aftermath of the Cold War. While the bipolar system had imposed a certain hierarchical order on global politics, subordinating ideological, ethnic and religious tensions to the logic of superpower confrontation, its collapse led to the emergence of a far more fragmented and multi-layered configuration. Ethnic claims, previously contained within rigid geopolitical blocs, resurfaced with renewed intensity across different regions, from the former Soviet space to Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. In this context, state borders increasingly appear vulnerable, challenged by a wide range of subnational, transnational and supranational dynamics.

This transformation can be interpreted through Rosenau’s (1990) theory of turbulence, which describes the coexistence of a state-centric system and an emerging multicentric world composed of diverse actors and identities. The weakening of traditional authority structures, the fragmentation of collectivities and the rise of sub-state actors contribute to a reconfiguration of political space, where processes of centralisation and decentralisation coexist and interact. Within this framework, the principle of self-determination of peoples—enshrined in international law—acquires a particularly ambivalent character: while it represents a fundamental right, it also contains a disruptive potential, often fuelling ethnocentric dynamics and generating tensions between national sovereignty and minority claims (Epasto, 2005).

The case of Kosovo provides a paradigmatic example of these dynamics. Originally part of Serbia within the Yugoslav federation, Kosovo became the centre of an armed conflict during the Yugoslav crisis, driven by the Albanian majority. Following NATO intervention and a period of United Nations administration, Kosovo declared independence in 2008, receiving recognition from numerous states and, in 2010, a favourable opinion from the International Court of Justice. However, the lack of universal recognition and the continued opposition of Serbia illustrate the persistence of contested sovereignty. Moreover, concerns expressed by countries such as Spain

and Greece highlight the broader geopolitical implications of secessionist processes, particularly the potential for domino effects within multiethnic states.

At the same time, the Kosovar case reveals the intrinsic complexity of ethnic-based state formation. The absence of a fully distinct national identity, the strong cultural and political ties with Albania, and the presence of ethnically mixed territories demonstrate how processes of independence may generate new forms of instability rather than resolving existing tensions. Similar ambiguities can be observed in other contexts, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where the recognition of secessionist entities remains selective and politically contingent.

More broadly, the issue of ethnic minorities represents a global phenomenon that affects both developing and developed regions, constantly challenging the foundational pillars of the modern State—territory, sovereignty and political cohesion. While the intensity and forms of these dynamics vary across contexts, the underlying tension between unity and diversity remains a defining feature of contemporary geopolitical configurations.

In order to interpret these processes more systematically, several analytical models have been proposed. Heraud (1966), for instance, conceptualises the trajectory of minority autonomy through a five-stage scale, ranging from self-affirmation to full self-management. Similarly, Salvi (1975) links the degree of autonomy to the perception of ethnic identity, distinguishing between different levels of awareness, opposition and conflict. These frameworks provide useful tools for understanding the evolution of minority claims and their territorial implications, highlighting the progressive intensification of identity-based demands and their potential impact on state structures.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore the need to analyse ethnic-linguistic minorities not only as cultural or demographic entities, but as dynamic actors embedded within complex geopolitical and territorial processes. Their interaction with the State contributes to reshaping political space, redefining sovereignty and generating new patterns of conflict and governance in the contemporary world.

5. Ethnicities, “Races” and Language: Intersecting Dimensions of Identity

From the analysis conducted, ethnicity, beyond definitional classifications, represents a perception of belonging in which the subjective-psychological element—although supported by a shared historical and cultural substrate—remains central. In this sense, ethnic identity cannot be reduced to objective or measurable criteria, but must be understood as a relational and context-dependent construct, shaped by social interactions and political processes across different spatial scales.

Recent studies have further explored the interplay between ethnic identity and state governance, particularly in diverse socio-political contexts. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, dominant ethnic groups play a significant role in shaping national identities and state-level power dynamics (Green, 2018). Similarly, research on minority mobilisation strategies—such as the “Druzification from below” observed in Israel—illustrates how minority groups actively navigate ethnocratic systems, leveraging their cultural and political identity to maintain relevance and agency within asymmetric power structures (Woźniak-Bobińska, 2024). These dynamics highlight how ethnic identities are not static attributes, but evolving processes embedded within specific territorial and institutional configurations.

Within this perspective, the relationship between ethnicity and race requires particular attention. While the two concepts are often conflated, especially in political and social discourse, they operate on different analytical levels. The complex relationship between ethnicities, races and languages has been extensively examined by the Italian geneticist Cavalli Sforza, whose multidisciplinary work—combining genetics, archaeology, linguistics and historical demography—reconstructs the history and geography of human populations through genetic variation (Cavalli Sforza, 1996; 1997; 2007). His research challenges the very notion of race as a biologically grounded category, demonstrating instead that human diversity reflects processes of environmental adaptation and gradual differentiation.

From this perspective, the concept of race emerges primarily as an ideological construction, historically produced and socially imposed. Unlike ethnicity—which is rooted in shared cultural practices and subjective identification—race often reflects externally assigned classifications, shaped by power relations and institutional frameworks (Fouberg and Murphy, 2020). This distinction becomes particularly relevant in conflict situations, where groups may resort to ethnic narratives to justify divisions that lack any meaningful biological basis, as observed in contexts such as Ulster, the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda.

Despite the analytical distinction between race and ethnicity, it is nevertheless evident that, in certain contexts, cultural identities may be associated with visible physical traits. However, such associations should be understood as contingent and non-causal, as no scientific evidence supports a direct link between genetic descent and ethnic belonging (Cerreti and Fusco, 2007).

Overall, the intersection between ethnicity, race and language reveals the inherently constructed and relational nature of identity, as well as its deep entanglement with spatial, political and historical processes. Understanding these interconnections is essential for analysing how identities are mobilised, contested and redefined within contemporary geopolitical configurations.

6. Dissecting the Roots of Ethnic Conflicts: A Thorough Analysis

The causes of ethnic conflicts can be traced back to a complex interplay of political, economic, cultural, religious and demographic factors. Rather than operating in isolation, these dimensions tend to overlap and reinforce each other, generating multifaceted conflict dynamics that vary across different geopolitical contexts.

From an analytical perspective, it is possible to identify several main categories of drivers of ethnic conflict. A first key dimension concerns economic factors, which are often underestimated in the literature. In many cases, ethnic mobilisation is closely linked to conditions of economic marginalisation and relative deprivation. Minority groups frequently experience structural disadvantages compared to dominant populations, which may act as a catalyst for collective mobilisation aimed not only at recognition, but also at improved socio-economic conditions. The conflict in Northern Ireland, for instance, while commonly framed in religious and cultural terms, is deeply rooted in the economic and social disparities between the Irish Catholic community and the Protestant majority. Similar dynamics can be observed in Quebec, where economic and linguistic factors intersect, and in the case of the Inuit population, whose claims for autonomy led to the establishment of Nunavut in 1999. In other contexts, such as Chechnya, economic interests—particularly related to natural resources—

interact with ethnic and religious identities, contributing to long-term instability and conflict.

However, the role of economic factors remains debated. Connor (1995), for example, argues that economic inequalities should be considered reinforcing rather than primary causes, emphasising instead the centrality of ethnonational identity as the core driver of conflict. This divergence highlights the need for a multidimensional analytical framework. Recent empirical research has further explored these dynamics, showing how institutional configurations and patterns of representation may influence the emergence and evolution of ethnic conflicts, particularly in postcolonial contexts (Jeong, 2023).

A second dimension relates to political and institutional factors, particularly the distribution of power within the State and the degree of inclusion or exclusion of minority groups. As noted by Lizza (2008), conflicts may emerge from struggles over political authority, but also from the manipulation of historical memory and identity narratives. In this sense, political-cultural conflicts—rooted in contested histories and symbolic representations—play a crucial role in sustaining long-term tensions.

A third category concerns geosocial and territorial dynamics, including forced migrations, deportations and spatial inequalities. These processes often generate deep-rooted grievances that persist over time, contributing to cycles of conflict. Religious factors further intersect with these dynamics, especially in contexts where identity is strongly tied to belief systems and where access to resources—such as land, water or energy—acquires both economic and symbolic significance.

These analytical dimensions are clearly reflected in some of the most complex contemporary conflicts. The Kurdish question, for example, illustrates the intersection of political marginalisation, territorial fragmentation and identity-based mobilisation. Despite historical recognition of their right to self-determination, Kurdish populations have been subjected to repression, forced assimilation and geopolitical instrumentalisation across multiple states. The Syrian conflict has further intensified these dynamics, offering new opportunities for Kurdish political actors while simultaneously increasing regional instability (Kaya and Whiting, 2017).

Similarly, the Armenian case highlights the long-term consequences of historical violence, forced displacement and diaspora formation. The persistence of tensions in regions such as Nagorno-Karabakh reflects the unresolved interplay between national identity, territorial claims and geopolitical competition (Berg and Mölder, 2012). In both cases, ethnic identity operates as a powerful mobilising force, deeply embedded in spatial and historical contexts.

More broadly, ethnic conflicts manifest across all regions of the world, albeit with different intensities and configurations. From the tribal dynamics of Sub-Saharan Africa—often shaped by colonial legacies and resource competition—to the fragmented geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, and from separatist movements in Western Europe to identity-based tensions in North America, the global distribution of ethnic conflicts underscores the universality of these processes.

In this perspective, ethnic belonging, far from diminishing in the context of globalisation, appears to be increasingly reactivated as a response to processes of homogenisation and centralisation. The resurgence of ethno-cultural identities reflects not only a search for recognition, but also a reaction to perceived marginalisation within political, economic and territorial systems.

Understanding the roots of ethnic conflicts therefore requires an integrated and multi-scalar approach, capable of accounting for the interaction between structural inequalities, political dynamics, cultural identities and spatial configurations. Only through such a framework is it possible to grasp the complexity of contemporary conflicts and to develop more effective and inclusive governance strategies.

7. Language and Religion as Pillars of Ethnic Identity: Unifying and Diversifying Ethno-Linguistic Minorities

In the identity construction of ethnic groups, language plays a central role, acting both as a primary catalyst of cohesion among individuals and as a fundamental element of local culture. At the same time, it represents a key factor in differentiating communities, contributing to the diversity that characterises ethno-linguistic minorities. As highlighted by Breton (1991), the close interconnection between linguistic space and geographic space underlines how language is not only a means of communication, but also a spatial marker that defines territories, boundaries and cultural landscapes.

From a geopolitical perspective, language can be understood as a strategic resource and an instrument of power. Historically used as a tool of assimilation, it continues to shape relations between dominant and minority groups within the State. Linguistic policies, in particular, may either promote inclusion or exacerbate tensions, contributing to processes of marginalisation and conflict. This dynamic is evident in both post-colonial contexts and advanced economies. Examples include bilingualism debates in Canada, the role of Spanish in the United States, the linguistic divide in Belgium between Flemish and Walloon communities, and the claims of Basque and Catalan populations in Spain. Similarly, in Slovakia, the 2010 law restricting the use of minority languages intensified tensions with the Hungarian minority, demonstrating how state intervention in linguistic matters can directly influence interethnic relations. The geopolitical relevance of language becomes even more evident in conflict-prone regions. In Moldova, the issue of Transnistria represents not only a territorial and security challenge, but also a linguistic conflict embedded within broader geopolitical tensions (Coyle, 2018). Comparable dynamics can be observed in other post-Soviet spaces, including South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and eastern Ukraine. In these contexts, language operates as both a marker of identity and a geopolitical instrument. The Russian strategy of protecting the “near abroad” (ближнее зарубежье) illustrates how linguistic and cultural ties are mobilised to maintain spheres of influence, supported by institutional initiatives such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation, formally established by presidential decree in 2007 (Russian Federation, 2007), and the Rossotrudnicestvo programme (Branițchi, 2021).

The Russkiy Mir Foundation subsequently evolved into a broader transnational instrument for the promotion of Russian language, culture and geopolitical influence abroad (Russkiymir, 2007).

Beyond its communicative function, language thus assumes the characteristics of a soft power tool, capable of shaping political alignments and territorial dynamics. A similar role can be attributed to religion, which, as a powerful factor of identification and cohesion, has acquired increasing geopolitical relevance in the context of globalisation and the crisis of traditional ideologies. Religious identities often intersect with ethnic and political divisions, contributing to the intensification of conflicts across different regions of the world.

In Europe, ethno-religious tensions have expanded beyond the traditional Balkan context to include the former Soviet republics, Turkey and parts of Eastern Europe. More broadly, from African tribal conflicts to the complex political-religious dynamics of the Middle East, religion emerges as a key driver of identity-based mobilisation. The resurgence of religious fundamentalisms can be interpreted as a response to processes of deterritorialisation and socio-economic transformation, filling the void left by weakened political and ideological structures.

Brubaker (2013) provides a particularly insightful interpretation of these dynamics, arguing that religion and language represent the most significant axes of cultural differentiation in contemporary societies. His analysis suggests that, in the Western world, religious pluralism tends to be more resilient than linguistic diversity, leading to a historical reversal in which religion increasingly replaces language as the primary terrain of political contestation.

Taken together, these considerations highlight how language and religion function not only as markers of identity, but as active components of geopolitical processes. Their interaction contributes to shaping territorial configurations, influencing power relations and redefining the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. Understanding their role is therefore essential for analysing the dynamics of ethnic conflict and the evolving relationship between identity, space and political authority.

8. Global Geopolitical Mosaic: The Enriching Influence of Immigrant Minorities in a Multiethnic World

The global multiethnic geopolitical landscape is further enriched by those minorities that could be described as spontaneous, formed by groups of immigrants. Territorial mobility represents one of the most typical and ancient phenomena of human societies; the spread of the Homo species across the earth's surface was determined precisely by the great migrations that occurred in prehistoric times from the African continent to other territories, corresponding to demographic explosions or in search of new resources. The world's mosaic of peoples, therefore, is the result of voluntary or forced movements, colonizations, exoduses, and diasporas that have occurred over millennia at varying rates in all geographical areas of the globe (Dagradi, 2006), but today, driven by cultural, economic, and communication globalization, becomes a global phenomenon. The arrival of often substantial groups of individuals from different geocultural, geopolitical, and geoeconomic realities inevitably alters the social, economic, and cultural realities of the destination regions, with a complex impact often marked by intolerance; the greater the cultural, religious, social, and lifestyle differences between the hosted and hosting groups, the greater the possible reactions of rejection by the native populations, which can give rise to law-permitted discrimination, with real burdens imposed on immigrants, indirect discrimination, or simple attitudes of hostility.

Everywhere, therefore, the issues associated with the integration of immigrants while preserving the homogeneity of the State and respecting the identity of the immigrants are the subject of specific policies, to which is added the increasing importance they assume on the international agenda. The evolution of the political-legislative approach to the issues related to large international migrations, moreover, depends not only on the increase of the phenomenon in recent times but also on the perception and

emotional impact they have generated in the countries of arrival and departure (Boggio et al., 2008).

From the political-territorial analysis carried out, it is possible, for example, to classify ethnic groups based on the political and geopolitical context in which they find themselves, which contributes to determining both the ideological connotation and the tendency towards autonomy and the perception of diversity that they assume. In multiethnic and multinational countries, ethnic groups base their identity on language, as in Switzerland or Belgium, on religion, think of Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus in India, on nationality, as in the territories of the former Soviet bloc, and on race, as in the case of South Africa. In states that do not self-define as multiethnic, on the other hand, including, for example, African countries, Turkey, Japan, but also many Western states, minorities often concentrate in a regional territorial dimension, such as Bretons and Corsicans in France, for example, or base their specificity on racial connotations, as in the African American communities in the States, or on religious discriminants, think of the Copts in Egypt recently protagonists of violent persecution acts, or, finally, linguistic and tribal, as the Berbers in Algeria or the tribes in Libya. The Libyan case clearly illustrates how tribal fragmentation can intensify state instability and weaken national cohesion in periods of political transition (Moisseron, 2011). Very often, a minority ethnicity in one state corresponds to the majority in another: Hungarians in Romania, Turks in Bulgaria, Hispanics in the United States are just the most striking examples of this peculiar situation.

9. Redefining Sovereignty: The Evolving Crisis of the State Concept

To fully understand how the phenomena discussed so far contribute to what is widely recognised as the crisis of the State, it is necessary to analyse their impact on the fundamental elements of political and social organisation: territory, population and sovereignty. Processes of globalisation have progressively eroded traditional barriers and national borders, triggering forms of deterritorialisation that affect not only economic systems but also political and security structures. Contemporary conflicts—particularly those linked to transnational terrorism—transcend territorial boundaries, further challenging the spatial foundations of state authority.

At the same time, the principle of subsidiarity has encouraged the redistribution of power towards subnational levels, including regions and local territorial entities. This dual dynamic produces a paradoxical spatial configuration: on the one hand, national territories are fragmented into multiple functional and relational spaces; on the other hand, these same spaces increasingly overlap and extend beyond formal state boundaries, generating complex multi-scalar governance arrangements.

Globalisation, however, is not limited to economic and political transformations; it also deeply reshapes the concept of “people”. Transnational mobility, particularly in relation to labour and migration flows, has intensified processes of cultural interaction and identity recomposition. Identities that were historically constructed—often through conflict and exclusion—are now subject to continuous processes of hybridisation, juxtaposition and coexistence within shared territorial contexts. As a result, multiethnic societies emerge, characterised by the coexistence of diverse languages, religions and cultural practices, posing new challenges for state governance.

These processes contribute to the weakening of the traditional “geocentric” conception of the State, based on a stable correspondence between territory, population and

sovereignty. The proliferation of political, economic and social actors operating across different scales reduces the exclusivity of state power, redefining sovereignty as a more diffuse and negotiated form of authority. The increasing role of civil society—through religious organisations, human rights groups and cultural associations—further reshapes the political landscape, extending governance beyond the institutional boundaries of the nation-state (Rifkin, 2005).

Within this context, the management of minorities emerges as a central political issue, involving complex ideological and cultural considerations. Approaches to diversity oscillate between models of protection and recognition on the one hand, and tendencies towards assimilation or homogenisation on the other (Cerreti, Fusco, 2007). In this perspective, ethnic identities acquire a strategic relevance in political and economic geography, as they directly influence territorial balances and spatial configurations at different scales.

The resurgence of identity-based claims must therefore be understood within a broader geopolitical framework. As argued by Huntington (1996), contemporary conflicts are increasingly rooted in cultural and civilisational differences rather than purely socio-economic factors. Although his interpretation has been widely criticised for its simplifications (Ramonet, 1999), it nonetheless captures an essential aspect of current global dynamics: the persistent and, in many cases, intensifying role of ethno-cultural identities in shaping conflict and cooperation.

Ultimately, the crisis of the State does not imply its disappearance, but rather its transformation. Sovereignty is no longer exercised exclusively within fixed territorial boundaries, but is increasingly fragmented, shared and negotiated across multiple actors and scales. In this evolving scenario, the interaction between identity, territory and power becomes a defining element of contemporary geopolitical configurations, requiring new analytical frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of a world in which unity and fragmentation coexist.

10. Conclusions

The contemporary global landscape, characterised by increasing permeability of borders and unprecedented mobility, continuously challenges the traditional foundations of the nation-state. Contrary to earlier expectations of progressive homogenisation, the current scenario reveals a fragmented and dynamic reality in which ethno-cultural identities re-emerge as central elements of political and territorial organisation. As this study has shown, the relationship between ethnicity, identity and the State cannot be understood without considering the spatial and geopolitical dimensions through which these dynamics unfold.

The analysis demonstrates that ethnic identities, far from being residual or declining phenomena, actively interact with state structures, contributing to processes of territorial reconfiguration, multi-scalar governance and the redefinition of sovereignty. In this perspective, the crisis of the State does not imply its disappearance, but rather its transformation into a more complex and negotiated form of authority, shaped by the interplay between local, national and transnational actors.

At the same time, contemporary transformations—ranging from digitalisation to climate change—introduce new layers of complexity in the relationship between minorities and state power. The emergence of digital economies and infrastructures, for instance, challenges traditional notions of sovereignty, raising issues of access,

control and inclusion (Roberts, 2024; Mayer and Nock, 2024). Similarly, environmental pressures and climate-induced mobility disproportionately affect minority and indigenous groups, intensifying existing inequalities and generating new potential sources of conflict. This is particularly evident in Arctic regions, where indigenous communities are increasingly exposed to environmental transformation and governance challenges linked to climate change (Arctic Council, 2021; Mardikian and Galani, 2023; Shanaah et al., 2025). These dynamics highlight the need to integrate technological, environmental and socio-political dimensions within a unified analytical and policy framework.

Within this evolving context, the management of diversity emerges as a crucial test for the resilience and adaptability of contemporary states. Models of pluralist and integrative governance offer promising pathways for addressing these challenges, as they seek to balance the preservation of cultural identities with the need for political cohesion (Morland, 2014; Lange and Jeong, 2024). Empirical examples such as Canada's multiculturalism policy and South Africa's post-apartheid constitutional framework illustrate how institutional arrangements can support inclusion while maintaining state stability (Kymlicka, 2003; South African Government, 1996).

The findings of this study suggest that effective governance strategies must be grounded in a multi-scalar and territorially sensitive approach, capable of addressing the structural roots of inequality while recognising the relational nature of identity. Policies aimed at fostering local autonomy, enhancing digital inclusion, supporting just transition mechanisms and promoting climate resilience can contribute to mitigating ethnic tensions and strengthening social cohesion (European Commission, 2020).

Ultimately, the challenge of the contemporary era lies not in suppressing diversity, but in governing it. The interaction between ethnicity, territory and power requires analytical frameworks that move beyond rigid state-centric perspectives, embracing the complexity of a world in which identities, spaces and sovereignties are continuously renegotiated. In this sense, the integration of geopolitical, geographical and socio-cultural perspectives offers a crucial pathway for understanding and addressing the evolving dynamics of ethnic conflict and state transformation in the twenty-first century.

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