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Hybrid Warfare and Persistently Contested Sovereignty in the Western Balkans: The Role of Regional Cooperation

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Abstract

This study examines how hybrid warfare undermines state sovereignty in the Western Balkans and evaluates the role of regional cooperation in reducing vulnerability gaps and strengthening regional security. It argues that hybrid threats, particularly disinformation and the exploitation of transnational organized crime networks, operate as interconnected mechanisms that amplify structural weaknesses in institutionally fragile states. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on academic literature, policy documents, and regional security reports, focusing on the interaction between hybrid interference, governance deficits, weak intelligence capacities, and fragmented institutional responses.

The findings show that hybrid warfare functions as a continuous and multidimensional process that erodes institutional authority and reinforces contested sovereignty. Transnational organized crime emerges as a key intermediary, facilitating political influence and destabilization through financial and operational networks. Fragmented national responses increase exposure to hybrid threats, while regional cooperation enhances resilience through intelligence sharing, coordinated law enforcement, joint early-warning systems, and policy harmonization. The study contributes to theoretical debates by conceptualizing sovereignty as a dynamic and continuously contested process under hybrid threat conditions. It concludes that effective security governance in the Western Balkans requires the integration of national institutional capacities, intelligence-led resilience, rule-of-law strengthening, and institutionalized regional cooperation.

Keywords: hybrid warfare, contested sovereignty, regional cooperation, transnational organized crime, Western Balkans

Introduction

The Western Balkans constitutes a fragile and fragmented security space where post-conflict legacies, weak institutional consolidation, and contemporary geopolitical pressures intersect. Incomplete reconciliation after the wars of the 1990s, prolonged democratic transitions, and unresolved political disputes have created persistent instability. A report by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly highlights that, unresolved relations between Kosovo and Serbia, alongside political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, continue to risk destabilizing the region and create opportunities for criminal networks and external influence (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2024). The repercussions of Russia's aggression against Ukraine have further re-centered the Western Balkans within European security concerns, especially as hybrid threats increasingly intersect with ethnic tensions, economic vulnerabilities, and intensified regional defense cooperation (Gardner, 2025). Consequently, the region should be understood as a strategic space where geopolitical competition converges with institutional fragility.

A key challenge lies in the interaction between longstanding structural weaknesses and emerging hybrid threats. Transnational organized crime, corruption, and weak governance structures create fertile ground for destabilization. Criminal networks have moved beyond traditional trafficking by exploiting political corruption and institutional weaknesses, forming systems that protect illicit activities and influence political processes (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), 2023). These networks intersect with political financing and external influence, reinforcing systemic vulnerability. Hybrid warfare intensifies these dynamics by combining military and non-military tools, including disinformation, cyber operations, and economic coercion, to undermine institutional integrity without overt conflict. The Western Balkans remain particularly susceptible because of fragile political and societal structures, while limited domestic reforms sustain exposure to hybrid interference despite the stabilizing effects of NATO and European Union integration (Dolan, 2022). Recent cyberattacks and coordinated disinformation campaigns further illustrate how hybrid operations exploit low institutional trust and political polarization (Kovalčíková et al., 2024).

Disinformation and corruption operate as central instruments of hybrid warfare, often reinforced by local actors and media ecosystems. External actors exploit economic dependencies and energy relations to maintain influence, particularly in countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Support4Partnership, 2025; Vangeli, 2020). These dynamics show that hybrid warfare extends beyond the information

domain and includes economic leverage, institutional capture, and the manipulation of governance vulnerabilities. The intersection of hybrid threats with organized crime fundamentally challenges sovereignty, as criminal networks can serve as intermediaries for financing, influence, and destabilization. Coordinated law enforcement operations demonstrate that such threats cannot be addressed by individual states alone (Europol, 2023). Reports also emphasize that institutional fragmentation and weak cooperation mechanisms increase vulnerability, making regional cooperation essential for strengthening resilience and security (Zorić et al., 2024).

Theoretical perspectives reinforce this argument. Regional Security Complex Theory highlights the interdependence of threats across borders (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), while securitization theory explains how threats are constructed as security issues (Buzan et al., 1998). State capacity theory further emphasizes the importance of institutional effectiveness and intelligence systems in managing security risks (Migdal, 2001; Born & Leigh, 2005). In the Western Balkans, weaknesses in these areas limit the ability to anticipate and counter hybrid threats. Empirical evidence shows that even where capacities remain limited, coordinated regional and international efforts can produce tangible results, including reductions in irregular migration and the disruption of criminal networks (Frontex, 2024). Public trust is also critical, as institutional transparency and performance increase resilience against disinformation and external interference (Kapetanović, 2025).

Against this background, regional cooperation emerges as a key mechanism for reducing vulnerability gaps. Initiatives involving intelligence sharing, coordinated operations, and policy harmonization demonstrate that collective approaches can transform structural weaknesses into functional advantages (Zorić et al., 2024). However, political divisions and limited trust continue to constrain the effectiveness of such cooperation. This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by integrating hybrid warfare, organized crime, intelligence capacities, and regional cooperation into a single analytical framework. While previous studies often focus on individual dimensions, this research examines their interaction and combined impact on sovereignty. The guiding research question is: How does hybrid warfare continuously undermine sovereignty in the Western Balkans, and in what ways can regional cooperation reduce vulnerability gaps and strengthen regional security?

The study analyzes forms of hybrid interference, the role of criminal networks, and vulnerabilities in intelligence and border management, while assessing the effectiveness of regional cooperation mechanisms. It aims to contribute to both theory and practice by offering an integrated perspective on security governance in the Western Balkans.

Literature Review

A growing body of scholars identifies the Western Balkans as a critical space for understanding the transformation of the European security order. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has accelerated shifts in security thinking across Europe, increasing military spending and fostering new frameworks for defense cooperation. Gardner (2025) highlights intensified militarization, new partnerships, and modernization of armed forces. Initiatives such as trilateral cooperation between Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo, alongside Serbia's agreement with Hungary, reflect evolving alliance patterns and a broader reconfiguration of regional security dynamics. Rising defense budgets in Kosovo and Serbia further support military modernization and the acquisition of advanced capabilities (Gardner, 2025). These developments indicate that responding to hybrid threats requires both intelligence capacities and conventional preparedness, particularly in contexts where structural fragility limits institutional effectiveness and rapid response capabilities.

The war in Ukraine has also reshaped the European Union's approach, shifting from soft power toward more assertive geopolitical instruments. The Western Balkans has become a zone of strategic competition between Russia and the West, with persistent influence exercised through political narratives, public opinion, and strategic partnerships, particularly in Serbia (Support4Partnership, 2025). Enlargement fatigue and inconsistent EU commitments contribute to a political environment marked by ambiguity, which hybrid actors exploit to reinforce anti-European narratives, deepen polarization, and obstruct reform processes. In this sense, hybrid interference is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather embedded within broader geopolitical dynamics that shape domestic political trajectories and institutional behavior.

Structural vulnerabilities remain central to exposure to hybrid threats. Institutional fragmentation, corruption, and weak administrative capacity enable both internal and external actors to exert influence with relative ease. Threats such as organized crime, disinformation, cyberattacks, and political interference transcend national borders and require coordinated responses, yet regional cooperation remains uneven and insufficiently institutionalized (Zorić et al., 2024). The persistence of legal and institutional gaps allows non-state actors and criminal networks to operate across borders with limited constraint, reinforcing patterns of systemic vulnerability. Democratic regression, politicization of institutions, and weakened media independence further facilitate hybrid interference (Freedom House, 2024; European Commission, 2020). These dynamics indicate that institutional weakness is

not merely a background condition, but an active enabling factor that shapes both the intensity and effectiveness of hybrid operations.

Information manipulation represents a key dimension of hybrid warfare. Shared linguistic and cultural spaces facilitate cross-border disinformation, blurring the distinction between internal and external narratives (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2025). As externally generated content is often internalized within domestic discourse, the identification of foreign influence becomes increasingly complex. This dynamic undermines epistemic clarity and weakens public trust in institutions, creating conditions in which hybrid actors can more effectively shape perceptions and political attitudes. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated approaches combining media monitoring, civic education, and institutional responses, as well as sustained efforts to strengthen information resilience at both societal and institutional levels.

The literature also emphasizes the need to reposition the Western Balkans within the European security architecture. Rather than being treated solely as a recipient of security, the region is increasingly viewed as a potential contributor to broader European stability. Experts highlight grey-zone threats such as disinformation, illicit financing, and technological interference, which require anticipatory and coordinated responses (Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 2025; George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2025). Recent incidents, including tensions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, illustrate how unresolved disputes and weak governance structures create opportunities for hybrid actors to exploit existing divisions (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2024). These developments demonstrate that insecurity in the Western Balkans is not episodic, but structurally embedded and continuously reproduced through the interaction of political fragility and external pressure.

Empirical evidence shows that regional cooperation can produce measurable results. Strengthened coordination has reduced irregular migration flows and improved law enforcement cooperation across borders (Frontex, 2024; European Commission, 2023). Initiatives such as the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council further demonstrate that sustained political commitment can translate into practical security outcomes. At the same time, these efforts reveal that cooperation is most effective when supported by institutional alignment, shared strategic priorities, and mechanisms for information exchange and joint operations.

Theoretical frameworks provide important insights into these dynamics. From a broader theoretical perspective, the transformation of security in the Western Balkans reflects the wider process of the globalization of security, in which authority and security provision are no longer monopolized by the state but are increasingly shaped by complex interactions between state and non-state actors (Mabee, 2009). Regional Security Complex Theory highlights the interdependence of security dynamics across states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), suggesting that threats in the Western Balkans cannot be effectively addressed within isolated national frameworks. Securitization theory explains how issues such as migration and disinformation are constructed as security threats (Buzan et al., 1998), although such framing remains insufficient without corresponding institutional capacity. State capacity theory emphasizes the importance of governance effectiveness, territorial control, and intelligence systems in managing security risks (Migdal, 2001). These theoretical perspectives converge in highlighting that institutional capability is central to both resilience and vulnerability in hybrid threat environments.

Empirical studies demonstrate how contested sovereignty and institutional fragility shape hybrid warfare. Corruption and low public trust increase vulnerability to disinformation and external influence (Transparency International, 2023; RAND Corporation, 2019). In such contexts, hybrid actors do not necessarily need to generate new conflicts but rather amplify existing divisions and institutional weaknesses. Organized crime acts as a key facilitator, providing financial and operational support to hybrid actors (Shelley, 2014; Hoffman, 2007). This interaction between criminal networks and political structures further complicates the security landscape, blurring the distinction between legal and illicit forms of power.

The information domain remains central, with disinformation campaigns exploiting societal divisions and weakening institutional legitimacy (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019; EUvsDisinfo, 2023; Kapetanović, 2025; Rid, 2020). By shaping perceptions and generating uncertainty, information warfare undermines both civic engagement and democratic accountability. External actors employ diverse hybrid instruments, as seen in the Montenegro coup attempt and similar patterns in North Macedonia (Bellingcat, 2017; Galeotti, 2017). These cases illustrate that hybrid strategies are often aimed not at achieving direct control, but at maintaining instability and limiting the consolidation of democratic institutions.

Regional cooperation remains essential, strengthening resilience through intelligence sharing, legislative harmonization, and coordinated responses (RAND

Corporation, 2019; Zorić et al., 2024). However, geopolitical divisions and unresolved disputes, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia, continue to constrain cooperation and create vulnerability spaces that hybrid actors can exploit (Support4Partnership, 2025). The effectiveness of cooperation is therefore contingent upon political trust, institutional alignment, and the gradual resolution of bilateral tensions.

The literature also underscores the need for stronger intelligence capacities, emphasizing professionalism, institutional independence, and democratic oversight (Born & Leigh, 2005). Strengthening intelligence systems enhances early warning capabilities, improves risk assessment, and supports more effective policy responses to hybrid threats. At the same time, coordination among international actors remains essential. The European Union, the United States, and NATO must align their strategies to counter hybrid threats, support institutional reforms, and strengthen resilience across the region.

Regarding this discussion, hybrid warfare in the Western Balkans operates through the interaction of structural vulnerabilities, external pressures, and institutional weaknesses. Regional cooperation and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures remain critical for reducing vulnerability gaps and strengthening long-term stability.

The security environment in the Western Balkans reflects the interaction between external pressures and internal vulnerabilities, where hybrid threats operate across multiple domains. Cyber-enabled interference, disinformation, and foreign influence have become key instruments for destabilizing governance structures (European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2024). At the same time, corruption and weak institutional oversight enable hybrid actors to exploit systemic gaps and reinforce political fragmentation (European Western Balkans (EWB), 2025). NATO emphasizes that hybrid threats constitute a central dimension of contemporary security, requiring coordinated responses and resilience-building across sectors (North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 2022, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, hybrid warfare blurs the boundaries between conventional and non-conventional conflict, combining multiple instruments to challenge traditional security frameworks (Renz & Smith, 2016). In regions with contested sovereignty, such as the Western Balkans, limited state consolidation constrains institutional authority. As a result, sovereignty emerges as a dynamic and continuously contested condition shaped by both internal and external pressures (Weller, 2009).

Building on the theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence discussed above, this study advances a structured analytical framework to examine the mechanisms through which hybrid warfare interacts with institutional vulnerabilities and shapes security outcomes in the Western Balkans. The analysis demonstrates that hybrid threats operate through the combined effects of disinformation, organized crime, and political influence, while exploiting weaknesses in intelligence capacities, governance structures, and regional coordination. Accordingly, the study develops a set of hypotheses that capture the relationships between national intelligence capacities, hybrid warfare activities, regional cooperation, and their effects on border security, contested sovereignty, and regional stability.

H1. *The strengthening of national intelligence capacities in the Western Balkans has a positive effect on the effectiveness of border security.*

National intelligence capacities represent the independent variable (X1), while the effectiveness of border security represents the dependent variable (Y1). National intelligence capacities refer to the resources, professional expertise, technological tools, cyber intelligence capabilities, and legal-institutional frameworks available to intelligence agencies within each state. These capacities are essential for collecting, analyzing, and using information to identify potential cross-border threats. In this framework, the effectiveness of border security refers to the ability of state institutions to prevent, detect, and respond to such threats, including irregular border crossings, smuggling and trafficking networks, terrorist or criminal activities in border areas, and violations of law at border crossing points.

Analysis H1:

National intelligence capacities (X1), including staff professionalization, advanced data collection technologies, cyber analysis, and functional legal frameworks, enhance the ability of institutions to identify cross-border threats in a timely manner. Since border security relies on intelligence-based decision-making, improved analytical and detection systems enable proactive prevention and more rapid responses. As a result, the effectiveness of border security (Y1) increases, reflected in reduced irregular crossings, improved detection of smuggling networks, and more effective law enforcement at border areas. The relationship between these variables is therefore positive and direct (X1 → Y1).

This relationship is supported by the intelligence-led policing (ILP) model, which integrates intelligence collection, analysis, and operational decision-making to improve security outcomes. According to the Organization for Security and

Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2023), border policing should be embedded within national intelligence systems to ensure continuous data collection and analysis. Empirical evidence from the Western Balkans indicates that weaknesses in intelligence capacities, such as limited data availability, reduce the effectiveness of border security, whereas investments in intelligence systems and integrated border management strategies significantly improve threat detection and prevention. Consequently, strengthening intelligence capacities constitutes a key mechanism for enhancing border protection.

H2: *Hybrid warfare conducted by internal actors in the Western Balkans contributes to the persistent contestation of state sovereignty by undermining institutional capacity and political authority.*

Hybrid warfare activities of internal actors represent the independent variable (X2), while contested sovereignty represents the dependent variable (Y2). Hybrid warfare activities of internal actors refer to domestic forms of destabilization, including information manipulation and disinformation, collaboration with or support from organized crime networks, political capture of institutions, and interference in state governance mechanisms. These activities weaken the capacity of the state to function effectively and undermine institutional legitimacy from within. In this framework, contested sovereignty refers to the erosion of state authority, the delegitimation of public institutions, and the fragmentation of territorial and political control, which together reduce the ability of the state to exercise coherent and legitimate governance.

Analysis H2:

Hybrid warfare activities conducted by internal actors (X2), including information manipulation, links with organized crime, and institutional capture, disrupt state functioning and create conditions for destabilization. These mechanisms weaken political authority and institutional capacity, leading to increased contested sovereignty (Y2), reflected in the erosion of state authority, delegitimation of institutions, and fragmentation of control. The relationship between the variables is therefore direct and negative for state sovereignty (X2 → Y2).

Hybrid warfare is conceptualized as the combined use of military, political, informational, and economic instruments to undermine state capacity (Hoffman, 2007). In the Western Balkans, internal actors employ disinformation, institutional manipulation, and the exploitation of ethnic tensions, reinforcing a persistent condition of contested sovereignty. The region's patterns of competitive authoritarianism

further align with hybrid strategies of media control, judicial manipulation, and state capture (Bieber, 2018), while the politicization of security services weakens institutional legitimacy (OSCE, 2023). Empirical evidence shows that organized crime is often intertwined with political structures, and domestic disinformation campaigns contribute to internal destabilization (UNODC, 2021; KCSS, 2023). Such dynamics illustrate that sovereignty becomes fragile when institutions are unable to exercise effective authority (Krasner, 1999).

H3: *Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans reduces the impact of hybrid warfare and contributes to the strengthening of regional security.*

Regional cooperation represents the independent variable (X3), the reduction of hybrid influence functions as the mediating variable (M3), and regional security represents the dependent variable (Y3). Regional cooperation refers to mechanisms of intelligence and information sharing, joint security operations, policy harmonization, and institutional coordination between states. These forms of cooperation can reduce hybrid influence by limiting the spread of disinformation and propaganda, weakening political interference and non-conventional pressures, and disrupting criminal networks and influence channels used by hybrid actors. In this framework, regional security refers to political stability among states in the region, the reduction of cross-border threats such as organized crime, trafficking, and extremism, and the collective capacity of states to respond effectively to shared risks and crises.

Analysis H3:

Regional cooperation (X3) strengthens intelligence sharing, operational coordination, and policy harmonization, thereby limiting the operational space of hybrid actors. These mechanisms contribute to the reduction of hybrid influence (M3) by decreasing disinformation, political interference, and cross-border criminal activities. As a result, regional security (Y3) improves through greater political stability, reduced transnational threats, and enhanced collective capacity for risk management. The relationship is therefore positive and mediated ($X3 \rightarrow M3 \rightarrow Y3$).

The literature emphasizes that regional cooperation is essential in contexts characterized by institutional fragility (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Fragmented institutional environments create opportunities for hybrid operations, whereas coordinated responses and harmonized strategic communication enhance resilience (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019). Empirical evidence shows that joint analytical networks and coordinated law enforcement operations reduce the

ability of criminal organizations to exploit cross-border gaps (Frontex, 2024). Regional cooperation further strengthens interdependence and trust among states, limiting opportunities for destabilizing interference (Bechev, 2019). However, persistent political tensions, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia, continue to constrain cooperation and create vulnerability spaces that hybrid actors can exploit.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, selected in light of the complex, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary nature of hybrid warfare and contested sovereignties in the Western Balkans. The primary objective of the study is not the statistical measurement of variables or the quantitative testing of hypotheses, but rather the analysis of the mechanisms through which hybrid threats, organized crime, and institutional weaknesses interact to undermine state sovereignty and generate persistent vulnerability gaps at both national and regional levels. The methodology is grounded in an analytical and interpretive research design, aimed at explaining processes, patterns, and causal relationships within a broader political, institutional, and security context. The Western Balkans is conceptualized as a regional security complex, in which hybrid threats and forms of insecurity are interconnected and transcend state borders, thereby necessitating a regional rather than a purely national perspective.

The study relies exclusively on the use of secondary sources, selected through a systematic and critical process. These sources include academic literature from the fields of security studies and international relations, institutional reports produced by international and European organizations, strategic documents of the European Union and NATO, and analyses by credible think tanks addressing regional security, organized crime, and hybrid warfare. The primary method of data collection is documentary analysis, which enables the examination of official discourses, security strategies, analytical reports, and policy documents in order to identify key themes and recurring patterns of hybrid interference. This method allows for the comparison of institutional narratives with academic analyses and facilitates the identification of gaps between declared policies and actual implementation capacities.

Data analysis is conducted through a combination of thematic analysis and theoretical interpretation. Information extracted from the documents is categorized according to key themes such as intelligence capacities, border management,

disinformation, organized crime, and regional cooperation, and subsequently interpreted in light of established theoretical frameworks, including regional security complex theory, securitization theory, state capacity theory, and theoretical approaches addressing the globalization of security and interactions between state and non-state actors. The study's conceptual framework maps the relationships between independent variables, such as national intelligence capacities and internal actors' hybrid warfare activities, and dependent variables, including the effectiveness of border security and the degree of contested sovereignty. These relationships are operationalized through qualitative indicators related to institutional professionalism, risk analysis, interagency coordination, and the effectiveness of regional cooperation mechanisms.

This methodological approach allows for the analytical testing of the proposed hypotheses and creates space for in-depth interpretation of findings in relation to the specific context of the Western Balkans. By focusing on mechanisms of influence rather than solely on observable outcomes, the study seeks to provide a robust and scientifically grounded analysis of how hybrid warfare undermines sovereignty and how regional cooperation can reduce vulnerability gaps. Although the absence of primary data limits the ability to directly capture individual perceptions of local actors, the use of a broad range of secondary sources and their triangulation enhances the study's credibility, coherence, and analytical validity. This methodological choice is appropriate for an analysis aimed at capturing the structural and institutional dynamics of regional security.

Findings

The findings confirm that the Western Balkans constitutes a structurally vulnerable environment in which contested sovereignties, fragile institutions, and persistent political tensions create favorable conditions for the emergence and intensification of hybrid warfare. Legacies of past conflicts, incomplete democratic transitions, and weak institutional consolidation have produced a fragmented security order characterized by limited state capacity and dependence on external support. These structural weaknesses increase exposure to hybrid interference that exploits governance deficits, undermines institutional cohesion, and reinforces a persistent condition of contested sovereignty.

Hybrid warfare in the region operates not as isolated incidents, but as a continuous and multidimensional strategy that combines disinformation, economic pressure,

political influence, and organized crime. These mechanisms interact with existing vulnerabilities, blurring the distinction between internal and external dynamics and generating an environment of sustained uncertainty. As a result, sovereignty is weakened both by external interference and by limited domestic capacity to build resilient institutions capable of managing complex threats.

A key finding is the central role of transnational organized crime as an intermediary and amplifier of hybrid warfare. Criminal networks facilitate financing, logistics, and political influence, reinforcing corruption and weakening the rule of law. This convergence significantly limits the ability of individual states to address security challenges independently.

The analysis also highlights the importance of state capacities, particularly in intelligence and border management. Weak professionalism, politicization of intelligence services, and technological limitations constrain the ability to anticipate and counter hybrid threats. Conversely, cases involving institutional reforms and enhanced cooperation with international partners demonstrate that strengthened national capacities improve threat detection and border security outcomes.

Regional cooperation emerges as the most effective mechanism for reducing vulnerability gaps. Joint operations, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses produce tangible security outcomes and transform fragmentation into functional interdependence. However, such cooperation remains uneven due to political mistrust, institutional constraints, and unresolved disputes, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia, which continue to generate significant vulnerability spaces for hybrid actors.

The findings of this study indicate that sovereignty in the Western Balkans should be understood as a dynamic and continuously contested process shaped by the interaction of domestic weaknesses, hybrid interference, and the level of regional cooperation. Strengthening sovereignty therefore requires an integrated approach combining institutional resilience, intelligence capacity, and sustained regional cooperation.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to the research question on how hybrid warfare undermines sovereignty in the Western Balkans and how regional cooperation can reduce vulnerability gaps. The analysis confirms that the region

faces interconnected and transnational security challenges rather than isolated threats, aligning with theoretical perspectives on regional security complexes and the multidimensional nature of contemporary insecurity.

The findings demonstrate that hybrid warfare operates as a continuous and cumulative process. Both internal and external actors exploit institutional weaknesses, corruption, political polarization, and low levels of public trust to exert influence without overt conflict. Disinformation, economic pressure, and criminal networks interact with existing socio-political tensions, blurring the boundary between internal and external dynamics. In this context, sovereignty emerges as a dynamic and continuously contested process rather than a stable condition.

A key insight concerns the role of transnational organized crime as an intermediary of hybrid warfare. Criminal networks facilitate financing, influence, and institutional erosion, reinforcing the argument that combating organized crime is integral to protecting sovereignty. At the same time, weaknesses in intelligence systems, border management, and institutional coordination limit states' ability to anticipate and counter hybrid threats, while reforms and international cooperation improve resilience and security outcomes.

The discussion further supports the relevance of the regional security complex approach, emphasizing that threats transcend national borders and require coordinated responses. Securitization alone is insufficient without operational capacities and institutionalized cooperation. Regional cooperation emerges as the most effective mechanism for reducing vulnerability gaps, as joint operations, intelligence sharing, and policy coordination enhance collective resilience. However, such cooperation remains constrained by political mistrust and unresolved disputes, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia, which continue to create significant vulnerability spaces for hybrid actors.

The findings suggest that sovereignty in hybrid threat environments cannot be sustained through traditional state-centric approaches alone, but requires institutional resilience, societal trust, and structured regional cooperation. In this sense, the Western Balkans should be understood not only as a security consumer but also as a potential contributor to broader European security.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study reinforce the regional security complex approach by demonstrating that hybrid threats in the Western Balkans are inherently transboundary and shaped by political, economic, and societal interdependencies among the states of the region. In this context, sovereignty does not appear as a consolidated condition but as a dynamic and continuously contested process, exposed to hybrid interference that exploits institutional weaknesses, corruption, and political fragmentation. The study indicates that discursive securitization alone is insufficient in the absence of real operational capacities, highlighting the need to distinguish between formal and functional securitization in the analysis of regional security.

At the same time, the study contributes to theoretical debates on the globalization and networking of security by arguing that security provision in the Western Balkans depends on multi-level interactions between state and non-state actors. The systematic linkage between hybrid warfare, organized crime, and institutional capture challenges traditional state-centric approaches and calls for an integrated theoretical framework combining regional security, state capacity, and network-based analyses of influence. This perspective enables a more accurate understanding of insecurity in regions characterized by contested sovereignty and limited institutional resilience.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study indicate that addressing hybrid threats in the Western Balkans requires a shift from fragmented and reactive security approaches toward an integrated, intelligence-led model. Strengthening national intelligence capacities, improving border management, and safeguarding security institutions from political interference emerge as essential elements for reducing the structural vulnerabilities exploited by hybrid actors. Investments in professionalism, analytical capabilities, and cyber intelligence should be understood as integral components of sovereignty protection rather than merely technical reforms. At the same time, the fight against organized crime must be embedded within broader security strategies, as criminal networks function as key intermediaries of hybrid interference through financing, logistics, and political influence.

The study also underscores that regional cooperation is not a political alternative but a practical necessity for enhancing security. Structured intelligence sharing, joint operational mechanisms, and the harmonization of security policies

significantly constrain the operational space of hybrid actors and increase collective capacity for crisis management. However, the effectiveness of such cooperation depends on political trust, institutional resilience, and progress in resolving unresolved bilateral disputes, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia. For the EU and NATO, the findings suggest that engagement with the Western Balkans should simultaneously prioritize institutional resilience, the rule of law, and operational cooperation, treating the region not only as a consumer of security but as an active contributor to long-term regional and European stability.

Conclusion

This study has examined how hybrid warfare contributes to the persistent contestation of sovereignty in the Western Balkans and how regional cooperation can reduce vulnerability gaps in a fragmented security environment. The central argument of the article is that hybrid warfare in the region does not operate only through direct external interference or isolated destabilizing incidents. Rather, it functions as a continuous and multidimensional process that exploits institutional weaknesses, political polarization, corruption, disinformation, organized crime, and unresolved bilateral disputes. In this context, sovereignty cannot be understood as a fixed legal condition alone, but as a practical and contested capacity of the state to exercise authority, maintain institutional legitimacy, control security risks, and respond effectively to internal and external pressures.

The findings show that the Western Balkans remain particularly exposed to hybrid threats because of the interaction between structural fragility and geopolitical competition. Weak governance, limited institutional trust, politicized security structures, and incomplete democratic consolidation create an environment in which hybrid actors can operate below the threshold of open conflict. Disinformation campaigns weaken public confidence and deepen societal divisions, while economic leverage and political influence create additional channels for external pressure. These dynamics are especially dangerous because they do not necessarily seek immediate territorial control, but rather the gradual erosion of institutional authority and the maintenance of permanent uncertainty.

A major conclusion of the study is that transnational organized crime plays a central role in amplifying hybrid warfare. Criminal networks are not merely a separate security problem, but a functional intermediary through which hybrid influence can be financed, protected, and operationalized. Their links with corruption, illicit

markets, political actors, and weak border management systems make them particularly relevant to the contestation of sovereignty. When criminal networks penetrate institutions or exploit cross-border gaps, they reduce the capacity of states to act independently and coherently. Therefore, combating organized crime should be understood not only as a law enforcement priority, but also as a core component of sovereignty protection and regional security.

The analysis also demonstrates that national intelligence capacities and border security remain essential for reducing exposure to hybrid threats. Professional intelligence services, effective risk analysis, cyber capabilities, and interagency coordination strengthen the ability of states to detect, anticipate, and prevent destabilizing activities. However, national capacities alone are insufficient in a region where threats are transnational, mobile, and interconnected. Hybrid warfare benefits from fragmentation, mistrust, and institutional asymmetry between neighboring states. For this reason, isolated national responses often leave operational spaces that can be exploited by external actors, domestic spoilers, and criminal networks.

Regional cooperation emerges as the most important mechanism for transforming vulnerability into resilience. Intelligence sharing, coordinated law enforcement operations, joint early-warning mechanisms, policy harmonization, and cooperation with Euro-Atlantic institutions can reduce the operational space of hybrid actors. Such cooperation strengthens regional security not only by improving technical capacities, but also by building habits of institutional trust and collective response. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of regional cooperation remains constrained by unresolved disputes, especially the Kosovo and Serbia relationship, as well as by political mistrust and uneven institutional development across the region.

The article contributes theoretically by conceptualizing sovereignty in the Western Balkans as a dynamic and persistently contested process shaped by hybrid interference and institutional capacity. It also contributes practically by showing that resilience against hybrid threats requires an integrated model that connects rule of law, intelligence reform, border management, counter-disinformation measures, and regional cooperation. Future research should further examine specific country cases and include primary data from policymakers, security practitioners, journalists, and civil society actors. Such research would deepen understanding of how hybrid threats are experienced, interpreted, and managed at the national and local levels. Overall, the study concludes that the protection of sovereignty in the Western Balkans depends not only on stronger states, but also on stronger regional cooperation and a more coherent European security framework.

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