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Schengen in the suction of sovereignism

Abstract

This article examines how the Schengen system generates new tensions between European integration and state sovereignty. Schengen challenges the traditional concept of sovereignty by transferring border control to the European level, while simultaneously creating perceptions of lost national control. These contradictions provide fertile ground for sovereignist politics, which promise to simplify complex transnational realities by invoking "the will of the people" and reinforcing symbolic and material borders. Drawing on the Hungarian case, the paper shows how populist narratives and conspiracy thinking transform border politics into a self-reinforcing dynamic – the "suction of sovereignism" – in which political efforts to assert control intensify rather than resolve the paradoxes of European border governance.

Keywords: sovereignty, border sociology, European integration, populism, Hungary

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1. The argument

The European Schengen system poses a double challenge to state sovereignty. Programmatically, free mobility of persons within the Schengen area is established by handing over control of the borders of all member states to those members with Schengen external borders. This represents a break with the traditional understanding of state sovereignty. In practice, however, control of the EU's external borders falls short of the Schengen program. This results in a certain loss of internal control and a sense of vulnerability in the face of complex transnational contexts that cannot be controlled at national level. This is the starting point for sovereignist politics. Sovereignism is the political program and practice of radically simplifying complex social relationships by constructing a clear common interest of „the people" and strict demarcations against a hostile environment. State borders play a central role here, as they are both symbols and instruments for interrupting interdependency, thus shielding „the people" from external factors.

The core of the Schengen constellation is that the liberalization of mobility rules within the Schengen area is safeguarded by reliable control of the external border (Vobruba, 2016a). Doubts about this therefore reactivate internal borders. The shift of controls back to internal borders in the Schengen area sets in motion a dynamic of increase that is fed by two sources: 1. An excess of expectations: Restrictive border policy, especially as a central element of a political agenda, evokes more

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expectations of solving problems than it can fulfill. 2. The domino effect: The more intensively an internal country controls entries or enforces exits, the stricter the other countries have to be. Both result from the special interdependencies in the Schengen area. The excess of expectations and the domino effect together cause the suction of sovereignism.

2. What are borders?

Spatial borders are not lines, but areas perpendicular to the Earth's surface (Hilpert & Vobruba, 2025, 851). They separate three-dimensional political domains from one another. Political spatial borders separate the same from (largely) the same (Luhmann, 1997, 641). This becomes particularly clear when considering borders as boundaries of three-dimensional spaces with regard to airspace and ground. Although the air is similar on both sides of the border, there is the possibility of military violations of the respective airspace. There can also be conflicts over mining rights. Almost the same applies to the fundamentals of everyday life on both sides of a border: „Because on the other side, in other families or other villages, life is not fundamentally different, but similar to ours." (Luhmann, 1997, 641, my translation).

Since borders separate the same from the same, they must be technically fixed and symbolically elevated in order to be observable and relevant to action. This also makes it clear that political spatial borders are constructs, and rigid constructions at that: They are by no means "natural", but they are harsh realities for those who have to deal with them.

Borders manifest themselves through symbols and rules, influencing some cross-border processes, such as migration. As cross-border and border-protecting actors observe each other's border-related actions and act accordingly (Vobruba, 2016b. 215 ff.), borders are constituted as social facts (Simmel, 1908/1992, 697). This points to the fundamental paradox of spatial political borders (Eigmüller, 2016, 60f.). Borders make different territories identifiable through separation, thus creating the prerequisite for connection. Border politics operates with conflicts arising from the technical availability of space and the conflict dynamics of global society, both vertically and horizontally.

3. The Schengen system

From a sociological perspective on borders, the European border regime, the Schengen System, is a special case for two reasons.

Firstly, the Schengen Agreement calls into question one of the core elements of the traditional understanding of state sovereignty (Jellinek, 1900; Koselleck, 1990): The sovereign disposition of the state over its own borders, and thus over entries to and exits from the national territory. „‚Staat' und ‚Souveränität' sind zwei Be-

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griffe, die in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und ihrer rechtlichen Zuordnung aufeinander verweisen." (ibid.: 1) It is precisely this connection that is dissolving in the course of European integration. "The position of the nation state in the European constellation of institutions can no longer be adequately summarized in terms of traditional state semantics." (Bach, 2013, 124, my translation. See also Lepsius, 2000; 2013)

This also includes a new understanding of European borders. Sovereignism attempts the opposite: the adaptation of reality to an outdated model of political order.

In light of the long tradition and the paramount importance of state sovereignty in traditional state-theoretical thinking, the renunciation of controls at the internal borders of the Schengen area is an unlikely state-commitment. Secondly, Schengen is a particularly interesting case in terms of border sociology. Two relations are decisive here: firstly, the fundamental relationship in border sociology between separation and connection, stability and fluidity (Nail, 2021; Schindler, 2021), between border security on the one hand and border crossings on the other (Cantó i Milà, 2016). The obvious evidence: Borders only become a hot issue through the global flow of refugees and the attempts to control them, and only through the cross-border movement of goods, including controls and customs duties. Secondly, there is the Schengen-specific relationship between the liberalization of the movement of persons within the Schengen area and the strengthening of external border controls. Schengen encroaches on the sovereignty of all member states (Bach 2010, 164 ff.). Countries with internal borders give up sovereignty by ceding their border security to the countries with an external EU border. The sovereignty of countries with an external EU border comes under pressure, as securing their borders is no longer just a national matter, but concerns all member states (Vobruba, 2003; Eigmüller, 2007; Müller, 2014; Hilpert, 2020). The Schengen constellation has come under pressure mainly due to the increased migration in 2015, restrictive mobility policies during the Covid-19-crisis (Vobruba, 2023) and the influx of refugees in the wake of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Overall, the widely shared view that the EU's external border does not protect sufficiently increases the desire for borders within the Schengen area that separate strongly and thus revitalizes the traditional understanding of sovereignty, which is fixated on national borders.

Among many other effects not discussed here, the development of the Schengen system contributes to a general sense of threat from transnational interdependencies and complex interrelationships that are beyond the reach of national politics, but whose consequences are felt in people's everyday lives (Vobruba, 2024, 29ff.). This constellation significantly increases the real and symbolic importance of borders in terms of protection and the interruption of interdependence. State border controls are widely regarded as an effective and simple defense against external threats. This

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is why borders have a prominent position in the political-ideological toolbox of sovereignism.

4. Sovereignism as the promise to simplify society

What is simple politics?

Sovereignist positions are primarily represented by the parties organized within the European Parliament's two factions: „Patriots for Europe" (PfE) and „Europe of Sovereign Nations" (ESN).

The basic idea of sovereignism is that political intentions can be easily translated – i.e. in a 1:1 ratio – into corresponding effects (Vobruba, 2024, 23ff.). The „will of the people" determines the political intentions and thus the policy. Politics that is simple in this sense has plausibility, as it adopts and uses people's everyday understanding of causality, which is dominant in their Lebenswelt (Vobruba, 2024, 23ff.). Whether such simple connections merely create an "illusion of control" (Luhmann, 2000, 23) – more precisely: an illusion of implementability – or are in fact a promising basis for political action, cannot be theoretically decided in advance, nor does it need to be decided here. The decisive factor is that, in sovereignism, the political control of society as a whole is presented as simple. This is precisely why it must be seen as a promise to simplify society. In this simplified society, there is no complexity, no emergent processes, and there are no unintended effects. Failures of sovereignist politics are again simply interpreted: They are simply attributed to the malevolent intentions of enemies. We will see that this plays a role in the attraction of sovereignism.

The will of "the people"

The anchor of sovereignist politics is the populist concept of political will formation: "The people", as a pre-political entity, are both the source and carrier of the common political will, as well as the beneficiary and the object of political protection (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016, 83ff.; Vobruba, 2019). Populist political actors claim to know this will and present themselves as instruments that implement it. The misuse of instruments of direct democracy is integral to this.

In order to present the position of the present Hungarian government, I refer to one official Hungarian government source („about Hungary") and to two semi-official ones („Hungary today" and „Ungarn heute"). The current Hungarian government, currently a role model for sovereignist politics, organizes "national consultations" to determine the "will of the people". They are „an important instrument for the defense of national sovereignty", as the government refers to the results, especially when trying to legitimize divergent positions in the Council of the EU. In 2025, the Hungarian government asked the population about Ukraine's EU membership. The consultation was accompanied by an intensive anti-Ukraine campaign,

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in which it was claimed in particular that "Brussels" was planning Ukraine's accession during the war. The consultation attracted 2.27 million participants and resulted in a 95 % rejection rate (data not verifiable; Deutsche Welle, 26.6.2025).

The governmental fabrication of the will of the people becomes particularly clear in the following example. Several leading questions were asked in the consultation in December 2024, for example: Are you in favour of retaining the 13th monthly pension? – 96 % approval; of doubling the family allowance and rejecting the migration penalty? – each with 99 % approval. There were 1,350,690 responses and the result was as follows: "The 11 questions were answered with an overwhelming majority of 95–99 percent in favor of the government's proposals." From this, the current Hungarian government concludes: "The results of the national consultation give the government an enormous tailwind." (Ungarn heute, 16.1.2025, my translation) This is the circularity in which populist politics constructs the "will of the people", which it then implements.

Friend/enemy

The main characteristic of sovereignist politics is the way it positions itself externally, or how it constructs its outside. According to this perspective, all problems ultimately originate from outside, are caused by enemies and threaten "the people" within, necessitating defense. This is the core of the sovereignist program. State borders are therefore a prominent object of sovereignist politics. They create a clear distinction between ‚inside' and ‚outside', ‚friend' and ‚foe': almost every topic is adapted to this pattern of inside-friend/outside-foe. This is the decisive difference between populism and sovereignism: Populism constructs the opposition between the "people" and the "elites", while sovereignism charges it with the distinction between inside and outside, thereby radicalizing it.

In this process, an astonishing fantasy unfolds.

The current Hungarian government is tackling inflation in this way. The price gouging and profit hunger of international corporations are being blamed for rising prices. The Hungarian government, on the other hand, declares its position to be "always on the side of Hungarian families" (Ungarn heute, 26.2.2025) and introduces price controls. These directly demonstrate the simple connection between "political will" and social effect, but of course they do not solve the inflation problem. Despite state-imposed price ceilings for various foodstuffs, hygiene products, interest rates on loans, etc., the Hungarian government is not achieving its inflation target. (Ungarn heute, 25.6.2025). The country is seen as being under permanent pressure and needing to be defended: „Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said on Facebook on Wednesday that the Ukrainians are ramping up their attacks on Hungary because we have prevented Ukraine's European Union accession in Brussels. … ‚Kyiv must accept that they are not the ones who get to decide what

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the Hungarian people should think', the Prime Minister added." (About Hungary, 4.7.2025)

Hungary's borders must be protected against two external threats, namely migrants and the EU Commission: "Hungary pays daily fines for defending its external borders, the parliamentary state secretary of the interior ministry said in Brussels on Wednesday.... The proponents of migration have a plan to bring one million migrants to Europe every year, although the negative consequences of illegal migration are obvious." (Ungarn heute, 6.3.2025, my translation) Finally, Hungary's integration into the EU is viewed as particularly dangerous in light of historical events. "For a decade and a half, we have been resisting the insidious and aggressive ambitions of a new empire, now based in Brussels, in the spirit of Kossuth's Realpolitik." (Ungarn heute, 14.4.2025, my translation) Internal unity requires portraying all internal opponents as external enemies. This is why the national opposition is subsumed into the internal friend/external foe logic and thus turned into an external enemy. "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said Brussels and the opposition Tisza Party are candid about their goal to lower Hungarian living standards and they are conniving to turn Hungary into a failed state." (About Hungary, 16.4.2025) The current Hungarian government repeatedly emphasizes that it is defending the country against the opposition, which is making common cause with foreign enemies. (About Hungary, 9.5.2025) This is a late echo of the „innerstaatlichen Feinderklärung" (Schmitt, 1932/1996, 47) in authoritarian thinking on sovereignty.

All in all: Social relations are organized according to the friend-foe-pattern; all problems are seen as originating from outside. This is countered by a strong government that invokes the will of the people and translates it directly into policy. Sovereignism aims to simplify society by fantasizing about a permanent state of exception (Ausnahmezustand).

5. Sovereignist border politics

Sovereignist politics promises and attempts to simplify complex social relations, both real and symbolic. Reducing complexity requires interrupting interdependencies. The prominence of borders in sovereignism is essentially based on the idea of cutting off transnational interdependencies that generate complexity. Border policy is attractive to sovereignists because it is clearly visible (construction of facilities, controls, deportations) and because it allows them to demonstrate the "political will" more easily. The tendency to make individual actions (deportations etc.) public, but to withhold data that would make reports on the success of restrictive border policies verifiable, also points in this direction (The Economist, April 19th-25th 2025, 30f.). At least for the Schengen area, the following applies: In order to make restrictive border control policies publicly visible, police work must be concentrated on large, high-traffic borders. However, this means that small border crossings and

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even more so the green borders are hardly guarded. There is not enough manpower or funding for seamless border surveillance. In addition to this, sovereignist policies establish connections between migration and numerous phenomena that they consider to be problematic. Restrictive border policies must therefore be used as an instrument to achieve many goals: The fight against crime, terrorism, and the destruction of Western Christian culture. If the declared intention of stopping migration flows cannot be realized, or if unintended side effects occur, this is simply interpreted as follows: Malicious opposing forces were – for the time being – stronger. The sanctions against the Hungarian government for violations of the rule of law (Art. 7 TEU) are constantly reinterpreted by Hungarian officials to mean that the EU Commission is "punishing" Hungary's restrictive border policy. On the occasion of the presentation of the Hungarian Presidency's program for the second half of 2024 to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Orbán stated, among other things: „We must agree that anyone who wants to enter the territory of the EU must stop at the border of the EU and submit an entry request, and until it is positively assessed, that person cannot enter the territory of the EU. If we cannot achieve this, we will never stop migration. This is the only option. Today Hungary is being punished for doing just this." (Orbán, 8.10.2024)

If necessary, success is postponed and the same approach is continued in order to achieve it. In this sense, the pariah status of the current Hungarian government within the EU is reinterpreted: "Trump government adopts elements of Hungarian migration policy" (Ungarn heute, 7.4.2025, my translation), and the success of the sovereignist policy becomes a hope for the future: "The moment will come when the Hungarian point of view will be the majority, says Viktor Orbán." (Ungarn heute, 21.3.2025, my translation).

6. Sovereignism in the Schengen system

The specific dynamics of the European border regime result from the fact that the relationship between border security and border crossing determines not only the social quality of the external border, but also has consequences for border security and border crossings at the internal borders. The decisive consequence: The Schengen-constellation is an invitation to engage in the blame game. Migration pressure at internal borders can always be traced back to a lack of monitoring of the external border. This justifies the reintroduction of internal border controls and jeopardizes the free movement of persons within the EU. This is why the interaction between the external border and internal borders allows sovereignist politicians such as Orbán and Salvini to present themselves as the true defenders of free mobility in the Schengen area and the EU as a whole. By rigorously defending against migration at the national border, which is also the EU's external border, they are defending their country, the freedom of mobility within the Schengen area, and the Western civilization. In contrast to this „Brussels wants to erase our Judeo-Christian

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culture“ (About Hungary, 2.6.2025), as Balázs Hankó, the minister for culture and innovation, puts it. And the Commission is withdrawing millions of euros from Hungary as a penalty for securing the borders. “EU bureaucrats”, on the other hand, are planning to take in millions of migrants on behalf of their backers. “Our Real Political Opponents Are in Brussels, Says Prime Minister.” (Hungary today, 19.2.2025) The numerous references to the Hungarian government’s achievements in protecting the EU’s external border contrast with the Commission’s policy of allowing millions of migrants in at the behest of George Soros, combined with the suggestion of outsourcing migration defence: “Today, ‘Brussels is the threat and Cairo is the protection of Europe’ in relation to migration.“ (Ungarn heute, 18. 9.2024, my translation)

Explanations of migration and criticism of the EU’s Schengen policy are rooted in conspiracy thinking. “Us” (the people), versus “them” (the corrupt elite) is a classic pattern in which conspiracy theorists construct their world (Vobruba, 2024, 46ff.) This results in the demand that: „The ‚agents of the Soros network‘ must be expelled from the European Commission and corrupt lobbyists removed from the European Parliament.“ (Hungary today, 20.3.2025)

The evil intentions of a powerful entity are seen as the cause of migration. It is George Soros. Orbán consistently speaks of a “so-called George Soros plan, which he said was aimed at bringing a million migrants a year to Europe...” (Hungary today 7.2.2025) This is classic conspiracy thinking (Vobruba, 2024, 105ff.). Everything fits into a master plan: A super-rich and powerful entity in the background uses a political elite acting against the people to fundamentally and irreversibly change social conditions. The danger of migration is imminent: „The prime minister said, ‚we are doomed‘ if they entered, and ‚there is no way back.‘“ (About Hungary, 16.7.2025) But it is not yet too late. Because „we will not tolerate Hungary being made a puppet state again, a vassal of Brussels.“ (Hungary today, 23.10.2024) It’s five to twelve. Conspiracy thinking always constructs a great danger that can just about be averted. „To be Hungarian is to fight” (ibid.) This implies: (Almost) all means are considered appropriate (Vobruba, 2024, 106ff.), resulting in aggressive rhetoric. „They are attacking us because we are sovereignists and even patriots. We are under attack because we demand that the rule of law should also apply to Brussels. We are under attack because we demand that the fight against corruption should also apply to Brussels. Instead, European bureaucrats threaten their political opponents with fines, sanctions, and the loss of voting rights.“ (Hungary today, 20.1.2025) He sees the key to the future in “whether we can recapture Brussels from George Soros.” (Ungarn heute, 20.12.2024, my translation) Brussels is revealed to be the “Soros headquarters” (ibid.), as it does not organize effective external control and is therefore responsible for the reintroduction of internal controls (Hungary today, 6.3.2025). What's more, the fine proves that the Commission does not want to control the external border! Finally: Migration

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leads to terrorist attacks in Germany (Hungary today, 5.3.2025), which proves that Soros and the EU Commission are enemies of the people.

The relationship between conspiracy thinking and sovereignism can be explained by the fact that they are both different expressions of the desire to simplify society. Adopting this perspective enables us to recognize that this longing not only leads to an aberrant view of the world, but can also have tangible political consequences.

7. The suction of sovereignism

According to the sovereignist understanding, a state is only sovereign if it is in a position to strictly defend its borders. Sovereignist border policy thus becomes self-reinforcing. It feeds on two sources. Firstly, every restrictive border policy is driven by the border paradox, which leads to more of the same. Secondly, the Schengen constellation exacerbates the self-reinforcing dynamic of sovereign border policy. Due to the border paradox, restrictive border policies can never completely control their borders. The propagandistic, organizational and technical upgrading of borders (that which divides) never establishes complete control, and in fact makes border crossings (that which unites) even more conspicuous. The more visible the defense against transgressions becomes, the more conspicuous they become. Sovereignist politics do not resolve the border paradox (Eigmüller, 2016, 60), but are driven by it.

The prerequisite for the self-reinforcing dynamic of sovereignism is that politics must present itself to people in the logic of simple thinking. Political intentions and effects are simply linked. Otherwise, political programs would not exist. Since the logic of simple politics only depends on "political will", all problems can, in principle, be solved. This inevitably creates a surplus of people's expectations of politics. Politicians react to this by declaring even more far-reaching intentions, such as the promise of total control over borders. In other words, they reinforce the illusion of the feasibility of sovereign border policies. If the intended effects cannot be realized, the reaction is simply more of the same.

Secondly, the interdependencies of the Schengen constellation make border policy doubly susceptible to sovereignism.

A) Entries. As the concentration of controls at the common Schengen external border always involves a renunciation of state sovereignty, and since border crossings can never be fully controlled, there is always a willingness in the background to reactivate controls at internal borders. This becomes acute in the event of a (perceived) loss of control. If one country reactivates its border controls, there is strong pressure for other countries to follow suit.

B) Departures. Deportations from the center trigger a chain of deportations towards the periphery. This causes conflicts within and between individual Schengen countries, involving various institutions (courts, journalism, border guards). As a

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result, the importance and visibility of national borders continues to increase. The diplomatic row between Poland and Germany in the summer of 2025 illustrates this clearly.

8. Summary

The two related theses were can be summarized as follows:

A) Sovereignist politics is based on the need to simplify society. The appeal of sovereignism is enhanced by the corresponding self-portrayal of politics, as well as by people's desire for simple order in the face of complex social conditions.

B) The paradox of borders is that attempts to close them make their permeability all the more apparent, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in the Schengen constellation and that can be exploited in terms of sovereignty policy. This is the suction of sovereignism.

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