

## Populism and the Rise of Secessionist Movements in the European Union: A Geopolitical Analysis of Internal Fragmentation Dynamics

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### Abstract:

This article examines the relationship between populism and the rise of secessionist movements within the European Union from a geopolitical perspective. It argues that populism should not be understood solely as a reaction to socio-economic grievances or as a challenge to liberal democratic institutions, but rather as a discursive and political mechanism that redefines the boundaries of political community and sovereignty. By mobilizing a binary opposition between “the people” and “the elite,” populist discourse facilitates the reconfiguration of collective identities at the subnational level, thereby enabling the emergence of what this article conceptualizes as “**secessionist populism.**”

Drawing on a qualitative, multi-level analytical framework that combines geopolitical analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative case studies (Catalonia, Scotland, and Flanders), the article demonstrates how populism contributes to transforming secessionist claims from marginal or identity-based demands into politically legitimate and democratically framed projects. It further explores how the European Union, as a system of multi-level governance, inadvertently provides an enabling environment for these dynamics by weakening the mediating role of the nation-state while offering alternative frameworks for political and economic continuity.

The article introduces the concept of “**internal geopolitical fragmentation**” to capture the gradual and non-violent reconfiguration of political space within the EU, driven by democratic processes and subnational actors. It concludes that the interaction between populism and secessionism constitutes a structural challenge to the European integration project, as it destabilizes traditional conceptions of sovereignty, undermines national cohesion, and re-politicizes the foundations of the European political order.

**Keywords;** Populism, Secessionist Movements, European Union, Multi-level Governance Geopolitics of Internal Fragmentation

### Introduction

Over the past two decades, the European Union has undergone profound structural transformations that have affected the foundational principles upon which the integration project was built. These transformations have unfolded against the backdrop of overlapping, multi-dimensional crises—from the early stages of integration to the 2008 financial crisis, the

sovereign debt crisis, the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and, most recently, the repercussions of the war in Ukraine.

The effects of these crises have extended beyond economic and institutional domains to impact the political and identity structures of the European space, contributing to the erosion of traditional forms of legitimacy and the emergence of new modes of political mobilization.

Within this context, populism has emerged as one of the most prominent political phenomena reshaping the relationship between society, the state, and supranational institutions. It has advanced a discursive framework based on a simplified opposition between “the people” and “the elite,” assigning the latter responsibility for accumulated crises. However, the analytical significance of populism extends beyond its influence on national political systems; it lies in its capacity to redefine the boundaries of political belonging and to reconfigure the concepts of sovereignty and representation.

At the same time, Europe has witnessed a renewed surge of secessionist movements across several member states, particularly in regions characterized by distinct historical, cultural, and economic features, such as Catalonia, Scotland, and Flanders. While secessionist tendencies have traditionally been associated with historical grievances or identity-based claims, what distinguishes the current phase is their increasing convergence with a radicalized populist discourse. This intersection has given rise to new forms of political mobilization that transcend classical explanations of secessionism.

This interplay between populism and secessionism reflects a deeper transformation in the internal geopolitics of the European Union. The challenges confronting the European project have shifted from inter-state dynamics to processes unfolding within the nation-state itself, driven by subnational actors seeking to renegotiate their position within the European political space. In this context, a central paradox emerges: secessionist movements simultaneously perceive the European Union as a constraint and as an alternative framework capable of ensuring economic and political continuity following separation from the nation-state.

Despite the growing scholarly attention devoted to both populism and secessionism, most academic studies have tended to examine these phenomena in isolation—focusing either on populism as a manifestation of the crisis of democratic representation, or on secessionism as the outcome of economic or identity-based factors.

However, such analytical separation fails to capture the complex dynamics linking the two phenomena in the contemporary European context, particularly in light of the transformations affecting the concept of sovereignty within systems of multi-level governance.

Building on this observation, this article seeks to address this gap by analyzing the relationship between populism and the rise of secessionist movements within the European Union from a geopolitical perspective. It focuses on how populist discourse reshapes secessionist claims and examines the structural implications of this interaction for the future of the European integration project.

Accordingly, the central research problem can be formulated as follows: **to what extent does populist discourse contribute to reshaping secessionist tendencies within the European Union, and what are the geopolitical implications of this interaction for the trajectory of European integration?**

### Literature Review

The study of the relationship between populism and secessionism lies at the intersection of several fields of inquiry, including populism studies, theories of nationalism, and the literature on secession, as well as European Union studies understood as the analysis of a multi-level political system. However, these fields have largely evolved in parallel, without sufficient analytical integration between them.

With regard to populism, the literature offers several explanatory approaches that can be broadly categorized into three main strands. The first conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology, structured around a moral division between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004). The second focuses on populism as a political discourse that relies on simplification and mobilizing strategies (Laclau, 2005). The third links the rise of populism to broader structural transformations associated with globalization, economic inequalities, and the crisis of political representation (Goodwin, 2018). Despite their differences, these approaches converge on the idea that populism reflects a deep crisis in the patterns of political legitimacy within contemporary democracies.

By contrast, the literature on secession has traditionally focused on explaining the emergence of secessionist movements through multiple factors. Among these, Gurr’s model of relative deprivation highlights how perceptions of political and economic marginalization can generate secessionist demands. Similarly (Staff, 2025), Horowitz emphasizes the role of ethnic and linguistic cleavages in fueling separatist tendencies (Horowitz, 1985), while Hechter introduces the concept of internal colonialism to explain structurally unequal relationships between central and peripheral regions. These approaches share a common assumption: secessionism is primarily the product of structural imbalances within the nation-state (Hechter, 1977).

In the context of the European Union, a substantial body of research has examined the impact of European integration on both the nation-state and regional movements. Hooghe and Marks have argued that the EU constitutes a system of multi-level governance, which provides regions with new opportunities for political engagement beyond the confines of the state (Marks, 2001). Likewise, Keating has shown that certain regional movements have adopted strategies of “Europeanization,” mobilizing EU institutions as political and economic intermediaries in pursuit of autonomy or independence (Keating, 2000).

Nevertheless, the literature addressing the relationship between populism and secessionism remains relatively limited, and often focuses on isolated case studies without developing a comprehensive theoretical framework. While some studies suggest that populism may reinforce nationalist tendencies, they rarely explore how these dynamics can evolve into secessionist projects within a supranational context such as the European Union.

Accordingly, a central limitation of the existing literature lies in the absence of an integrated approach that combines the discursive analysis of populism with the geopolitical analysis of secessionism, particularly in light of the ongoing transformation of sovereignty within the European Union.

From this perspective, this article proposes to move beyond this analytical separation by developing a conceptual framework centered on what may be termed secessionist populism as a composite phenomenon that reconfigures the relationship between the center and the periphery within the European political space.

### **Methodology**

This article adopts a multi-level analytical approach that combines geopolitical analysis with discourse analysis in order to capture the complex dynamics linking populism and secessionism within the European Union.

First, geopolitical analysis is employed to examine how relations between the center and regions within member states are being reconfigured, with particular attention to the spatial, economic, and strategic dimensions of secessionist movements. This perspective allows secessionism to be understood as a process of redistributing power within a multi-level political space.

Second, the article relies on discourse analysis to explore how populist movements mobilize political language to redefine key concepts such as “the people,” “the nation,” and “sovereignty,” and how these concepts are transformed into legitimizing tools for secessionist claims. This analysis focuses specifically on the narrative structures that link social grievances to political demands.

Third, the study adopts a comparative case study approach, examining three key cases that represent different configurations of secessionist movements within the European Union:

- Catalonia (Spain),
- Scotland (United Kingdom), and
- Flanders (Belgium).

These cases are selected based on a set of criteria, including:

- their economic weight within the state,
- their distinctive identity characteristics (linguistic and/or cultural),
- their level of integration into the European market, and
- the intensity of secessionist political mobilization.

This methodological design enables cross-case comparison, allowing for the identification of common patterns while highlighting the specificities of each case.

Finally, the article follows a qualitative research approach, relying on the analysis of academic literature, political discourse, and institutional reports, without employing quantitative methods.

This choice is consistent with the nature of the research problem, which focuses on discursive and geopolitical dimensions.

## Section I: From Protest to Secession: An Analysis of Populist Dynamics in Contemporary Secessionist Movements

The simultaneous rise of populism and secessionist movements within the European Union cannot be adequately explained through linear causality or monocausal interpretations. Rather, both phenomena intersect within a European political structure characterized by the erosion of traditional party mediation, declining trust in political elites, and the reconfiguration of sovereignty in the context of multi-level governance (Marks, 2001, pp. 3-5).

In this context, populism emerges as a discursive resource that redefines the collective political actor, enabling secessionist movements to reformulate their claims within a renewed democratic and sovereign vocabulary (Laclau, 2005, pp. 93-100). Contemporary scholarship on populism has reinforced this conceptual shift, whether by defining it as a thin-centered ideology structured around the opposition between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004, pp. 543-544), or by linking it to the broader crisis of legitimacy affecting contemporary Western democracies (Goodwin, 2018, pp. 6-10).

### 1. Populism as a Structure for Redefining Sovereignty and Belonging

In the European context, populism derives its significance from its capacity to reconfigure the political field around sharp dichotomies such as people versus elites, identity versus alienation, and sovereignty versus dispossession (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 50-52). As Cas Mudde argues, populism does not constitute a fully-fledged ideology; rather, it is a thin-centered and reductionist framework that can be attached to a wide range of “host” ideologies (Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 6-7). This characteristic explains its adaptability, allowing it to align with nationalist right-wing movements as readily as with certain forms of protest-oriented left-wing politics (Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 21-23).

Eatwell and Goodwin, for their part, link the rise of populism to four major dynamics (Goodwin, 2018, pp. 8-12):

- declining trust in elites,
- identity-based anxieties,
- perceived economic marginalization, and
- a growing sense of loss of political control.

These factors generate not only electoral protest but also foster a collective search for forms of belonging that are smaller in scale and perceived as more authentic than the centralized nation-state (Goodwin, 2018, pp. 214-218). Within this framework, the transition from populism to secessionism becomes possible when “the people” is no longer defined as an inclusive national community, but rather as a territorially bounded group that perceives itself as morally and politically distinct from the central authority (Cachafeiro, 2002, pp. 487-489).

In this sense, populism evolves from being merely a discourse directed against European institutions or traditional political parties into a mechanism for redefining the legitimate boundaries of political representation (Laclau, 2005, pp. 154-160). When this mechanism extends into subnational or stateless national spaces, it enables the construction of a new

narrative in which the “real people” is no longer conceived as a product of national identity, but rather as the people of the region or the nation without a state (Keating, 2000, pp. 60-63).

At this juncture, populism begins to perform a distinctly secessionist function by delegitimizing the central state in much the same way it challenges ruling elites. The political center is thus reimagined as an entity that appropriates collective will, rather than merely acting as an administrative or constitutional intermediary (Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 11-13).

Through this transformation, it becomes possible to explain why contemporary European secessionist movements do not appear as simple extensions of classical nationalisms. Instead, they emerge as hybrid forms of mobilization that combine identity politics, protest dynamics, and a redefinition of sovereignty (Keating, 2000, pp. 9-12).

## **2. From the Social Causality of Populism to the Political Causality of Secession: Toward a Typology of Populism in Europe**

The literature demonstrates that populism does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is rooted in a deep-seated social perception of losing control over collective destiny (Goodwin, 2018, pp. 38-40). This perception may arise from economic transformations, the uneven effects of globalization, and/or the sense among certain social or regional groups that effective decision-making has shifted away from them—either toward European institutions or toward nationally embedded elites concentrated in major political centers (MARKS, 2008, pp. 9-11).

Within this context, populism functions as a language through which social frustration is politicized (Laclau, 2005, pp. 75-80). However, it does not remain confined to the realm of protest; it can evolve into a mechanism for redirecting this frustration toward a secessionist political project when social grievances are reframed within a regional discourse that identifies the core problem in the central structure of the state itself (Keating, 2000, pp. 45-48).

This highlights the importance of distinguishing between the social causality of populism and the political causality of secessionism. The former is linked to exclusion, inequality, and declining trust, whereas the latter involves the transformation of these grievances into claims for sovereignty (Staff, 2025).

In other words, populism does not automatically produce secession, but it provides the emotional and discursive infrastructure necessary for it to emerge. Through narratives of grievance, the victim–dominant dichotomy, and the framing of popular will as a moral truth that transcends existing constitutional arrangements, populism operates as a preparatory structure for secession in certain European contexts—particularly where strong identity resources and sufficient economic capacity enable such claims to be translated into viable political projects (Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 14-16).

European experience demonstrates that populism does not constitute a single, uniform pattern; rather, it represents a family of differentiated political forms. For analytical purposes, it is possible to distinguish between three commonly identified types:

- **sovereignist right-wing populism**, which emphasizes borders, national identity, and a nationalist rejection of the European Union;

- **social left-wing populism**, which mobilizes a discourse of “the people” against economic elites, austerity policies, and inequality;
- **cross-ideological protest populism**, which centers on the rejection of the traditional political system without advancing a coherent sovereignty project (Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 18-23).

However, this typology remains incomplete unless a fourth type is incorporated, namely secessionist populism. This variant targets not only political elites and Brussels but also the nation-state itself, which is reframed as a central authority that monopolizes sovereignty, wealth, and recognition (Keating, 2000, pp. 12-15).

Secessionist populism differs from classical nationalism in a crucial respect: it does not frame secession merely as a historical or cultural right, but as a direct democratic response to the perceived usurpation of popular will by the center. In this sense, it reappropriates the populist logic itself, but relocates it to the subnational level (Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 345-347).

Instead of invoking “the French people” or “the Spanish people” in opposition to elites, the discourse shifts toward “the Catalan people” or “the Scottish people” in opposition to the central state. Consequently, the national center no longer appears as the guarantor of political unity; rather, it is reimagined as functionally equivalent to the “corrupt elite” in broader populist narratives (Mudde, 2004, pp. 543-544). This transformation endows contemporary secessionism with additional appeal, as it transcends its conventional characterization as a closed identity-based issue, and instead emerges as an extension of a protest-driven democratic logic that claims to restore popular voice from the central structure of the state (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 72-75).

### 3. Classical Theoretical Contributions and Their Explanatory Limits

Classical scholarship on secession has provided foundational analytical tools for understanding its underlying drivers; however, these frameworks are insufficient on their own to fully explain the phenomenon in its contemporary European configurations (Hechter, 2001, pp. 3-6).

Ted Robert Gurr’s concept of relative deprivation explains how a group’s perception of being disadvantaged in comparison to others can generate protest, rebellion, and sovereignty-oriented claims. This approach is particularly relevant in cases where relatively strong regions perceive a lack of recognition, representation, or equitable returns for their economic contribution (Staff, 2025).

Donald Horowitz, in turn, emphasizes the role of ethnic and linguistic cleavages in transforming cultural differentiation into political conflict over power and recognition (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 52-55). Meanwhile, Michael Hechter’s concept of internal colonialism explains how the center produces structurally unequal relations with peripheral regions, thereby fostering peripheral nationalisms seeking emancipation from centralized dominance (Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, 2001, pp. 17-20).

Despite their analytical value, the explanatory power of these approaches becomes limited when applied to the contemporary European context. Current secessionist movements do not operate

within a closed state-centric environment; rather, they evolve within a multi-level European space in which the nation-state is no longer the sole locus of sovereignty, and where secession does not necessarily imply economic or legal isolation (Marks, 2001, pp. 2-4).

Moreover, these movements construct their legitimacy through a networked ontology, combining historical grievances, cultural differentiation, and a populist democratic discourse that redefines “the people” while strategically mobilizing liberal institutions—such as elections, referenda, and collective rights—to normalize the idea of secession (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 84-87).

Accordingly, contemporary explanations of European secessionism require moving beyond monocausal frameworks toward a more integrated perspective. In this view, populism operates as a resource that reactivates classical explanations of deprivation, identity, and domination within a more modern and politically adaptable discursive framework (Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 13-16).

#### **4. The European Union as a Host of the Populist–Secessionist Paradox: Toward a Geopolitics of Internal Fragmentation**

The specificity of the European context lies in the fact that the European Union operates simultaneously as a framework that constrains national sovereignty and as a political space that enables sub-state regions to develop new forms of political agency (BLANK, 1996, pp. 346-348). Scholarship on multi-level governance has shown that European integration has redistributed certain political resources and opportunities beyond the exclusive national channel, allowing regions, local authorities, and subnational actors to establish direct or quasi-direct linkages with the European level (Marks, 2001, pp. 68-72). Furthermore, Michael Keating has argued that “stateless nations” in Europe have found in the post-sovereign condition a framework that enables them to reclaim recognition without having to replicate the rigid model of the classical nation-state (Keating, 2000, pp. 72-75).

This transformation is precisely what gives secessionist populism its distinctive strength. Unlike traditional nationalist populisms, it is not compelled to reject the European Union outright; rather, it can instrumentalize it as a functional umbrella that ensures continuity after secession (Hepburn, 2010, pp. 30-33). Consequently, the relationship between secessionism and the European Union is not one of direct opposition, but rather a selective and pragmatic interaction, in which the rejection of the nation-state is articulated through strategic engagement with the European space (Hepburn, 2010, pp. 45-48).

This paradox became particularly visible in the debates surrounding the 2014 Scottish referendum and the 2017 Catalan crisis, where the question of secession was consistently intertwined with the question of remaining within the European framework, rather than exiting it altogether (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 134-138). This distinguishes contemporary European secessionism from classical models observed elsewhere, as it seeks repositioning within Europe rather than disengagement from it (Keating, 2000, pp. 8-10).

On this basis, the analytical value of the concept of secessionist populism lies in its ability to capture a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by populism or secessionism alone (Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 309-312). This hybrid configuration reflects a shift from the question “who governs in the name of the people?” to a deeper question: “who constitutes the people in the first place?” (Laclau, 2005, pp. 93-100) Once the definition of “the people” becomes contested, the political field itself enters a process of reconfiguration, and regions are transformed from administrative units within the state into geopolitical actors claiming an autonomous bargaining position within Europe (Keating, 2000, pp. 60-63).

At this stage, what may be termed a “**geopolitics of internal fragmentation**” begins to emerge—one that unfolds through gradual democratic processes, mobilizing electoral mechanisms, rights-based discourse, and representative legitimacy to challenge and erode the traditional structure of the nation-state from within (MARKS, 2008, pp. 23-25).

Accordingly, the first section leads to a central conclusion: populism should not be understood merely as a concomitant factor in the rise of secessionist movements, but rather as a constitutive force in their political and symbolic rearticulation (Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 30-32). It provides these movements with a protest-oriented democratic language, expands their social base, and transforms the demand for secession from a marginal or elite-driven issue into a politically viable option. Understanding the future of European integration therefore requires recognizing that populism and secessionism are deeply intertwined phenomena that together reshape the relationship between the state, sovereignty, and the European political space (MARKS, 2008, pp. 24-26).

## **Section II: Populist Ontology and the Geopolitics of Secession: Reconfiguring the European Political Space**

The intersection between populism and secessionism in the contemporary European context represents an ontological shift in both the nature of political actors and the modes through which legitimacy is produced within the European space (Ruggie, 1993, pp. 151-155). The nation-state no longer constitutes the exclusive unit of sovereignty, nor is “the people” a stable or uncontested concept; rather, it has become an object of political struggle and redefinition (Laclau, 2005, pp. 70-75).

Within this context, populism emerges as a mechanism for the reconstitution of political entities, enabling the rise of subnational actors that seek to renegotiate their position within a multi-level governance structure (Marks, 2001, pp. 3-6).

### **1. European Integration Between Unitary Dynamics and the Reproduction of Fragmentation**

The European project emerged within a historical context marked by the ambition to transcend the conflictual logic of the nation-state through the construction of a gradual integrative model based on the transfer of certain aspects of sovereignty to a supranational level (B.HAAS, 1958, pp. 16-20). This project was grounded in a functionalist assumption, according to which

economic integration would progressively lead to political and identity integration, thereby mitigating traditional nationalist conflicts (B.HAAS, 1958, pp. 297-300).

However, the evolution of the European Union—particularly since the Maastricht Treaty (1992)—has revealed a structural paradox: deepening integration does not necessarily weaken identity-based dynamics; in some cases, it may actually reactivate them. The expansion of EU competences has led to a redistribution of authority within member states, weakening the state's role as the exclusive intermediary between the center and the regions, and opening the space for subnational actors to claim more direct forms of representation within the European polity (BLANK, 1996, pp. 346-348).

In this context, secessionist movements have redefined their strategic orientation, shifting from a primary confrontation with the nation-state to engagement with the broader European framework, which provides new political and legal resources (Keating, 2000, pp. 47-50). As Keating has argued, certain European regions have adopted strategies of “Europeanization” of their claims, mobilizing EU institutions to renegotiate autonomy or independence (Keating, 2000, pp. 100-103). Thus, while the European Union constitutes a project of integration, it has also, indirectly, contributed to the emergence of a political environment in which secessionist claims are reformulated in ways that are less radical in their methods yet more complex in their implications (John McGarry, 2006, pp. 11-14).

## **2. Shared Identity Narratives: From “the People” to the “People of the Region”**

### **a. Populist Discourse and the Reconstruction of Secessionist Identity**

Populist discourse is grounded in a binary structure opposing “the people” to “the elite.” However, this dichotomy acquires a new dimension when it intersects with secessionist dynamics. In such cases, the opposition is transposed from the national to the regional level, where the “real people” becomes the people of the region, while the central state is reconstituted as a dominant and illegitimate elite (Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 345-347).

As Laclau argues, populism fundamentally operates through the construction of a chain of equivalence linking diverse social demands into a unified and overarching political discourse (Laclau, 2005, pp. 93-100). When this logic is mobilized within secessionist movements, economic, cultural, and political grievances are rearticulated within a single narrative centered on reclaiming sovereignty from the center (Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 312-314).

In this sense, secession is transformed from a mere political demand into an emancipatory act that redefines the relationship between community, territory, and authority. It is thus framed not as a traditional separatist rupture, but as a democratic response to a popular will that has been effectively marginalized or suppressed (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 70-73).

### **b. Toward Nations Without States: Redefining Nationhood and Sovereignty**

One of the most significant transformations in contemporary European secessionism is the emergence of the concept of stateless nations, in which the idea of the nation is decoupled from the state as a necessary sovereign framework (Keating, 2000, pp. 60-63). Within this perspective, nationhood is redefined on the basis of cultural identity and historical memory,

rather than on the possession of a fully institutionalized sovereign apparatus (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 37-40).

This reconceptualization intersects with broader transformations in the meaning of sovereignty within the European Union, where sovereignty has become fragmented and multi-level in nature (Ruggie, 1993, pp. 165-167). The state no longer monopolizes authority; instead, power is distributed across multiple levels—local, national, and supranational (Marks, 2001, pp. 3-6). Secessionist movements capitalize on this structured fragmentation of sovereignty by advancing claims to independence without fully relinquishing the benefits associated with EU membership, such as access to the single market, freedom of movement, and a shared legal framework (Keating, 2000, pp. 104-107).

However, this trajectory gives rise to a fundamental paradox: secessionist movements seek to achieve sovereignty through integration into a system that is itself based on its diffusion and sharing (Ruggie, 1993, pp. 170-172). This renders contemporary European secessionism a particularly complex phenomenon—one that is less concerned with restoring absolute sovereignty than with selectively redistributing it (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 120-123).

### **3. Secessionist Geographies: Regions as Geopolitical Actors**

European secessionist movements cannot be fully understood without taking into account their geographical and economic dimensions. These movements are typically concentrated in regions that share a combination of significant economic weight, distinct identity characteristics, and strategic positioning within the European space (Hepburn, 2010, pp. 18-21).

Catalonia, Scotland, and Flanders constitute prominent examples of this pattern. These regions function as economic engines within their respective states while simultaneously sustaining strong identity-based narratives (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 92-96). As Hechter has suggested, such cases can be interpreted through the lens of internal colonialism, whereby relatively prosperous regions perceive themselves as bearing a disproportionate fiscal burden in relation to the central state (Hechter, 1977, pp. 198-201).

However, what distinguishes the contemporary European context is that these regions are increasingly understood not merely as economic units, but as geopolitical actors seeking to redefine their position within the European system (Hepburn, 2010, pp. 40-43). Potential secession in these cases extends beyond the redrawing of national borders, carrying implications for the balance of power within the European Union itself (John McGarry, 2006, pp. 15-18).

This situation also raises highly complex legal and institutional challenges, as the European Union lacks a clearly defined framework for addressing cases of secession within member states. Such ambiguity opens the possibility of what may be termed geopolitical contagion, whereby the success of one secessionist movement could encourage similar dynamics in other regions (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 601-604).

#### 4. The European Union Between Democratic Legitimacy and the Integrity of the Nation-State

The European Union finds itself confronted with a structural dilemma that lies in reconciling two principles that appear, at least superficially, to be in tension:

- the promotion of democracy and the right to political expression, and
- the preservation of the unity and stability of its member states (Walker, 2002, pp. 337-340).

On the one hand, the European Union is grounded in liberal values that recognize collective rights and political expression; on the other hand, its stability depends on the continued cohesion of member states as integrated political units (Schimmelfennig, 2001, pp. 48-51).

This tension places the European Union in a particularly complex position, whereby any stance toward secessionist movements becomes open to contradictory interpretations:

- supporting such movements may be perceived as encouraging fragmentation,
- while opposing them may be interpreted as inconsistent with democratic principles (Tierney, 2012, pp. 171-174).

Accordingly, populist secessionist movements not only challenge the nation-state but also constitute a critical test of the European Union's capacity to manage political pluralism without sliding into processes of fragmentation (Walker, 2016, pp. 21-24).

#### Section III: Challenges to European Integration in the Rise of Secessionist Populism: Toward a Geopolitics of Internal Fragmentation

The intersection between populism and secessionism constitutes one of the most complex structural challenges facing the European Union in the current period, as it reflects internal crises within certain member states while simultaneously reactivating foundational questions concerning the nature of integration, the limits of sovereignty, and the sources of legitimacy within the European political space (MARKS, 2008, pp. 21-24).

In this context, secessionist populism cannot be understood as a marginal or contingent phenomenon; rather, it has evolved into a deep-seated dynamic that reshapes political and institutional balances within the Union, opening the way for what may be conceptualized as geopolitics of internal fragmentation (Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 313-316).

##### 1. Secessionist Populism and the Repoliticization of European Integration

Since its inception, the European project has been grounded in the logic of permissive consensus, whereby the process of integration was advanced largely beyond direct political contestation through reliance on elites and technocratic institutions (MARKS, 2008, pp. 5-7). However, the rise of populism—particularly in its secessionist form—has disrupted this equilibrium, transforming European integration into a subject of open political conflict (Kriesi, 2014, pp. 364-367).

Within this shifting landscape, secessionist populist movements do not primarily target the European Union directly; rather, they strategically reappropriate it within their political agendas. On the one hand, they criticize the EU as a source of eroding national sovereignty; on

the other, they present it as an alternative framework capable of ensuring continuity following secession from the central state (Hepburn, 2010, pp. 45-48). This duality reflects a transformation in the nature of their relationship with the Union—from outright rejection to a selective and pragmatic engagement (Keating, 2000, pp. 104-107).

The significance of this shift lies in its weakening of the mediating role of the nation-state, which has historically functioned as the central link through which legitimacy is transferred from citizens to European institutions. When the legitimacy of the state is challenged by secessionist populist movements, European integration itself loses one of its foundational pillars, resulting in a gradual fragmentation of the multi-level structure of legitimacy upon which the Union is built (Marks, 2001, pp. 3-6).

Accordingly, secessionist populism does not oppose European integration per se; rather, it repoliticizes it, transforming it from a technocratic and consensual project into a contested arena structured around competing definitions of sovereignty, representation, and belonging (Kriesi, 2014, pp. 369-371).

## **2. Internal Geopolitical Risks: From Stability to Secessionist Contagion**

From a geopolitical perspective, secessionist populism generates a new category of threats that may be described as **structurally embedded internal risks**, whereby the source of instability does not originate from the external environment or neighboring regions, but is instead produced within the political architecture of the European Union itself (Ruggie, 1993, pp. 165-167).

### **a. The Internationalization of Secessionist Claims**

One of the most salient features of this transformation is the tendency of secessionist movements to shift their claims from the national arena to the European and international levels. This process is pursued through:

- engaging with European Union institutions,
- mobilizing European public opinion, and
- deploying rights-based and democratic discourses (Hepburn, 2010, pp. 52-55).

The Catalan crisis of 2017 illustrates how a secessionist movement can attempt to internationalize its cause by framing it as a conflict between popular will and a central state perceived as constraining democratic expression (Keating, 2018, pp. 12-15). This process of internationalization transforms secession from a domestic issue into a geopolitical matter that can be instrumentalized within broader contexts, including great power competition (Keating, 2018, pp. 20-23).

### **b. The Logic of Geopolitical Contagion (Contagion Effect)**

The success of any secessionist experience—even if limited in scope—constitutes a political and symbolic precedent capable of stimulating similar movements in other regions. As Horowitz has noted, ethnic and political conflicts often diffuse through mechanisms of imitation and indirect influence (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 601-604).

In the European context, this dynamic is reflected in the potential transmission of secessionist models across regions, for example:

- from Catalonia to the Basque Country,
- from Scotland to Northern Ireland,
- and from Flanders to other regions within Belgium (Hepburn, 2010, pp. 70-73).

This process may be understood as a form of destabilization of political boundaries, whereby the nation-state becomes a continuously negotiable entity (Ruggie, 1993, pp. 170-172). Such a condition generates a broader climate of political uncertainty that negatively affects:

- institutional stability,
- economic investment, and
- trust in the political system (Kriesi, 2014, pp. 369-371).

### c. Reconfiguring Power Within the European Union

The impact of secessionism is not confined to the national level; it extends to the reconfiguration of power balances within the European Union itself. The emergence of new political entities—even relatively small ones—may entail:

- a redistribution of representation within the European Parliament,
- a reshaping of political alliances, and
- an increased complexity in decision-making processes (Fabbrini, 2015, pp. 78-81).

Moreover, several secessionist regions possess significant strategic importance, such as:

- Scotland (energy resources and maritime security),
- Catalonia (economic capacity and Mediterranean trade), and
- Flanders (European logistics and transport networks) (Guibernau i Berdún, 2013, pp. 92-96).

These characteristics grant such regions a bargaining power that exceeds their geographical size, positioning secessionism as a factor capable of influencing broader geopolitical balances within the European Union (Bourne, 2008, pp. 30-33).

### 3. The Limits of European Action: The Dilemma of Legitimacy and Sovereignty

The European Union faces a complex dilemma concerning the limits of its intervention in secessionist issues within member states. From a legal standpoint, the EU lacks clear mechanisms to address cases of secession, as such matters remain within the jurisdiction of the nation-state (Walker, 2016, pp. 21-24).

However, this formal legal neutrality does not preclude political effects, as any European position may be interpreted either as indirect support for secessionist movements or as alignment with central governments (Tierney, 2012, pp. 171-174).

This ambivalence reflects what may be described as the **limits of the European Union's normative power** (*Normative Power Europe*), as it struggles to reconcile:

- the defense of democratic values, and
- the preservation of stability within member states (Manners, 2002, pp. 240-242).

At this level, secessionism becomes a critical test of the Union's capacity to manage political pluralism without undermining the very foundations of the system upon which it is built (MARKS, 2008, pp. 23-26).

#### 4. Toward a Concept of the Geopolitics of Internal Fragmentation

Building on the preceding analysis, the concept of the **geopolitics of internal fragmentation** may be proposed as an analytical framework for understanding current transformations within the European Union. This concept does not refer to abrupt disintegration or systemic collapse, but rather to:

- gradual processes,
- operating within a democratic framework, and
- utilizing the instruments of the system itself (elections, referenda, and rights-based discourse)

to undermine the traditional structure of the nation-state (Ruggie, 1993, pp. 165-170).

The specificity of this form of fragmentation lies in the fact that it:

- does not rely on violence,
- does not fully depart from the legal order, and
- derives its legitimacy from popular support.

These characteristics render it more complex—and potentially more consequential—than traditional forms of fragmentation (MARKS, 2008, pp. 23-26). Within this context, regions are transformed into geopolitical actors seeking to reposition themselves within the European space, thereby reintroducing a fundamental question: does the European Union constitute a framework for transcending the nation-state, or a space that ultimately reproduces its fragmentation?

#### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the intersection between populism and secessionist movements within the European Union goes beyond the contingent coexistence of two political phenomena; rather, it reflects a profound structural transformation in the nature of the European political space and in the modes through which legitimacy and sovereignty are produced. Populism, as a discourse that redefines “the people” in opposition to elites, has evolved into a mechanism for reconstituting political actors at the subnational level, thereby enabling the emergence of regional entities that claim to represent distinct collective wills.

The analysis has shown that contemporary European secessionist movements no longer rely solely on historical, cultural, or economic justifications. Instead, they increasingly mobilize populist discourse to reframe their claims within a democratic-sovereign trajectory that links social grievances to the right of self-determination. In this sense, secession is transformed from a marginal or radical project into a politically viable option within the public sphere, supported by instruments of democratic legitimacy.

Furthermore, the study reveals that the European Union—despite its integrative nature—indirectly provides an institutional environment conducive to the reproduction of secessionist

dynamics. This occurs through the weakening of the mediating role of the nation-state, the consolidation of multi-level governance, and the provision of legal and economic frameworks that reduce the costs of secession. However, this situation places the EU before a structural paradox, characterized by the tension between supporting democratic values and preserving the stability of its member states.

Building on these findings, the article proposes the concept of “**geopolitics of internal fragmentation**” to capture these emerging dynamics, whereby traditional political structures are gradually reconfigured from within the system through democratic and discursive mechanisms rather than through violence or abrupt collapse. This renders the phenomenon more complex than traditional forms of fragmentation and more difficult to contain.

Accordingly, the future of the European project depends on its capacity to accommodate and reorganize internal tensions arising from the redefinition of sovereignty and belonging within a multi-level political space.

### Key Findings

1. **Populism as an indirect driver of secessionism:** While populism does not automatically generate secessionist movements, it provides the discursive and symbolic framework that expands their social base and normalizes their political claims.
2. **Redefinition of “the people”:** The shift from a national conception of the people to a regional one constitutes a key mechanism through which populist discourse transitions into secessionist mobilization.
3. **Secession as a democratic project:** Secession is increasingly framed as a legitimate democratic option grounded in elections and referenda.
4. **The European Union as an indirect enabler:** Through multi-level governance, the EU contributes to weakening state centrality, thereby expanding opportunities for regions to pursue autonomy or independence.
5. **Emergence of a new form of geopolitical risk:** This is reflected in gradual internal fragmentation, which threatens stability without manifesting as traditional crises.
6. **Repoliticization of European integration:** Integration is no longer a predominantly technocratic process but has become a contested arena shaped by struggles over sovereignty, identity, and legitimacy.

### Scientific Contributions

#### 1. Theoretical Contribution

- The development of the concept of **secessionist populism** as a composite analytical category linking populism studies with secessionist literature.
- The introduction of the concept of **geopolitics of internal fragmentation** as a framework for understanding gradual transformations within the European Union.

#### 2. Analytical Contribution

- Moving beyond the conventional separation between populism and secessionism by analyzing their interaction within a multi-level governance framework.

- Highlighting the role of political discourse in reshaping actors and political identities.

### 3. Methodological Contribution

- Adopting a multi-method approach (geopolitics, discourse analysis, and comparative case studies) to capture the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon.

### 4. Contribution to EU Studies

- Offering a novel interpretation of the European Union as a space that not only manages but also reproduces internal tensions related to sovereignty and identity.

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