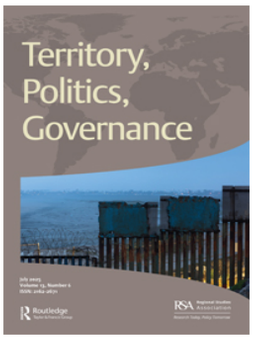

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Porous borders and the emergence of hybrid sovereignties

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the condition of hybrid sovereignties in unstable borderlands characterised by conflict, crime and cross-border mobility as well as the competition and collusion between violent non-state actors and state authorities. While in political practice open borders are often associated with mobility (of people), closed borders are imagined as guarantors of security (of nation-states). This dichotomy, however, ignores porosity as a third dimension. The article theorises the link between the porosity of borders and complementary governance constellations and discusses its implications for hybrid sovereignty. We illustrate our argument with insights from the Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands.

KEYWORDS

Borders; porosity; sovereignty; conflict; non-state actors; governance; hybridity; security

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the role of the porosity of international borders in reproducing hybrid sovereignties in unstable borderlands. We consider a border to be porous when governments' policies are to regulate or prohibit movement of humans and goods across borders, but these policies are not fully enforced. In such unstable borderlands, i.e., regions that experience organised violence and other forms of insecurity and that are traversed by an international border, state sovereignty is contested or complemented by violent non-state actors. We define a violent non-state actor as a set of at least three individuals who are (i) 'willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives'; (ii) thereby challenging the state's claim to the legitimate monopoly of violence by using or threatening to use violence illegally; and (iii) 'shaped through an organizational relationship or structure that exists over a specific period of time' and through which the individuals identify as members of this specific group (Schneckener, 2006, p. 25; 2009, pp. 8–9; Idler, 2019). Violent non-state actors can include politically motivated armed groups, criminal organisations or militias, which exert authority over parts of the border, for instance by governing informal border-crossings embedded in complex geographies. States like Colombia, for example, have limited control of these areas at its geographical margins. Guerrilla groups such as the

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National Liberation Army (ELN) have challenged the state's authority at the border with Venezuela (HRW, 2020). At the same time, Colombian state authorities have colluded with paramilitary groups which act as de facto 'state builders' (Ballvé, 2020, p. 9; Sanford, 2004).

Given the contested nature of state sovereignty, unstable borderlands are crucial sites for cross-border illicit or informal activities, ranging from contraband to drug trafficking (e.g., Guerrero-C, 2022). These economic activities provide violent non-state actors with the financial means to compete with, or complement, state authority. Financial incentives can also drive state actors to get involved in illicit cross-border activities, ranging from corruption to illegal taxation of border crossings and violent abuses of migrants as well as refugees (Zulver & Idler, 2019). Various constellations of governance between state and violent non-state actors emerge. When state and non-state actors compete with, or complement, each other in the provision of governance functions and no single entity exerts authority on its own, a particular form of sovereignty emerges: hybrid sovereignty.

Contrary to these manifestations of border porosity, borders still remain the most powerful markers of state sovereignty. Nonetheless, when building walls and fences, national governments engage in rather symbolic attempts to remain in, or perform, control against the background of declining state sovereignty (Brown, 2010). Borders can be 'simultaneously hard and soft' (Tholens, 2017, p. 865). This ambiguous condition can be found in regions ranging from Europe, for instance the Southern Balkans (see Dimova, 2021), to territories often addressed together as the so-called Global South. These comprise, for example, certain Asian borderlands with diverse types of 'borderland governance' (Baird & Li, 2017, p. 217) and practices of borderland communities seeking to escape the 'state's gaze' (Turner, 2013), as well as borderlands in Latin America (Idler, 2019; Kacowicz et al., 2020). Furthermore, such borders can also be permeable for some people (e.g., wealthy, Western tourists), while impenetrable for others (e.g., refugees) – a condition Mau (2023) describes when he talks about borders as 'sorting machines'. The prevalence of such border areas and the discourse of strict border closures across the globe calls for an approach that explains the simultaneous nature of different types of governance near and across borders by engaging with porous borders.

By focusing on border porosity, we go beyond common assumptions about open vs closed borders, mainly found in political discourse as well as in scholarship, for instance in International Relations (IR) (see, e.g., Vallet & David, 2012). We demonstrate the utility of understanding it as a third conceptual alternative to openness and closedness. To do so, we bring IR debates into dialogue with relevant scholarship in adjacent fields such as peace and conflict studies, human geography, political sociology and anthropology, for instance on border security (e.g., Okolie-Osemene and Adeniran Aluko, 2019) or migration (Howell et al., 2018). This article therefore critically engages with political calls to 'wall off' states and, to do so, engages with a conceptual lacuna that is still undertheorised, namely the condition of *porous* borders, i.e., the state between open and closed borders. This phenomenon is, we argue, key to understand the emergence of border co-governance and provides insights into the limitations and implications of governments trying to shield their countries from unwanted flows of people and goods.

Engaging with the material and human dimensions of porosity in unstable borderlands, we contend, helps elucidate hybrid sovereignty and allows for an original contribution to scholarship on 'the territorial logics of competing sovereignties' that this Special Issue is addressing from a variety of perspectives (Davis & Müller, 2025). While, over the past decade or so, scholars have paid considerable attention to 'hybrid sovereignties' (Fregonese, 2012), 'hybrid political orders' (Albrecht & Moe, 2015), 'hybrid violence' (Krause, 2012), 'hybrid peace' (Mac Ginty, 2010) and 'hybrid governance' (Villa et al., 2021) in the context of (post)conflict societies where formal and informal, local and international, and state and non-state actors provide governance (i.e., rules and regulations, or goods including security; Risse, 2012, p. 7), the role of

international borders in the making of hybrid sovereignty – and in particular the role of the ecology of the borders – has not yet been systematically explored (but see Arias et al., 2022; Tholens, 2017). We do so by bringing hybridity together with border studies.

We argue that porosity is conducive to complementary governance constellations that characterise hybrid sovereignty in unstable borderlands such as those comprising the Colombia–Venezuela border. Certainly, hybrid sovereignty emerges in many settings when different (state or non-state) actors make 'claims to sovereignly rule within a territory' (Davis & Müller, 2025). Indeed, in unstable regions, multiple sovereignties predate state borders and persist along border lines imposed by colonial powers (Shneiderman, 2013). However, as we contend, the context of porous international borders catalyses and solidifies this process, and it thus is favourable to consolidating hybrid sovereignty over time.

Two reasons for this stand out. First, in the context of porous borders, hybrid sovereignties can expand across national borders: non-state actors may provide governance functions across a cross-border territory while state actors remain more limited in their actions to 'their side' of the border (Brunet-Jailly, 2011; Idler, 2019; Tholens, 2017; Van Schendel, 2005). Second, in unstable borderlands, state sovereignty is not only contested; it can also merge with so-called 'non-state orders', producing a situation in which both state and non-state actors such as rebels, criminals, or paramilitary groups govern by, for instance, providing public goods (Idler, 2019, p. 34).

The territorial and material conditions of porous borders further help explain how hybrid sovereignties reproduce over time. The ecological characteristics of unstable border areas, often with mountains, rivers or jungles, which all add to the border's porosity, provide cross-border communities with ways of evading official border crossings to maintain historically grown community bonds across borders. They are also conducive to violent non-state actors engaging in (illicit) cross-border activities such as smuggling or trafficking, and in complementary governance, which allows them to expand their territorial grip over border populations. They can tax border communities or provide public goods including security.

We proceed as follows. First, we focus on porosity as a characteristic of international borders that are situated in unstable regions where state capacities are weak – due to a general lack of state capacity, ecological characteristics, limited political will to engage with these regions, or the selective investment of the state in certain governance functions but not others in these regions. Contextualising the concept of porosity with the notions of sovereignty, hybridity and complementary governance, we then demonstrate how the porosity of international borders consolidates hybrid sovereignty through the so-called 'border effect'. Finally, we draw some conclusions. The article is based on evidence from the Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands to illustrate our argument.

2. POROUS BORDERS

Mills (1996, p. 77) argues that '[b]orders are central to sovereignty' as they 'establish the categories of citizen and alien'. Even in a globalising world (Mau, 2023), borders have not lost their relevance, as the deadly consequences of 'Fortress Europe'[1] and border fortifications at the US-Mexico border show (Miller, 2019). The continued relevance of borders is widely accepted in the literature in border studies, IR and migration/refugee studies. However, borders have historically been permeable, or porous, and thus their role in the context of sovereignty is ambiguous (Mills, 1996, p. 78).

Three bodies of literature are key for our analysis and theorisation of porous borders and hybrid sovereignty. The first body of literature concerns scholarship focusing on the effectiveness of border walls and fences to protect national security. Even though there is research that finds no evidence that restrictive border regimes seeking to control cross-border circulation of people

increases national security (Andreas, 2009), this literature argues that fences, for instance, reduce the probability of terrorist attacks (Avdan & Gelpi, 2017). Accordingly, physical border barriers can be considered 'effective policy tools' to limiting adverse cross-border mobility, for example of terrorists (Avdan & Gelpi, 2017, p. 15) and hence addressing security emergencies. This literature, however, tends to ignore that the measures to enhance national security have oftentimes created new, or reinforced other, security challenges. For instance, despite the limited effects of border walls to contain the cross-border diffusion of militant actors, politicians promote their construction for populist reasons, thus contributing to the wider trend of the 'securitization of borders' (Linebarger & Braithwaite, 2020, p. 705).

The second body of literature discusses human rights and migration. It stresses the detrimental effects restrictive border regimes have on the physical security of people that depend on cross-border mobility, especially migrants, refugees and border communities (Slack, 2019). Accordingly, the international community developed a growing normative consensus on a shared responsibility to protect people who cross borders due to untenable living conditions in their home country. Closed borders would expose migrants to greater risks, translating in increased numbers of deaths (Guerette & Clarke, 2005; Heller & Pécoud, 2020), and force people to rely on smuggling networks (Andreas, 2009, p. 13).

A third body of literature approaches borders from a geographical, sociological/ethnographic and cultural viewpoint. This scholarship engages with third spaces along and across international borders that transcend the respective nation-states: 'borderlands' (e.g., Idler, 2019) or 'borderscapes' (Brambilla, 2015). In these spaces, formal and informal control practices co-exist or merge into alternative governance forms that we discuss here through the lens of hybrid sovereignties. Stepputat (2013, p. 39), for instance, argues that state and non-state actors alike claim to be sovereign, including across borders. Yet such claims are tentative since power configurations in these spaces are difficult to disentangle (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 6). Considering the border as an artefact – in both its symbolic and material dimensions – helps understand these competing configurations.

In political discourse, open borders are often associated with the mobility of people, as across the territory of the European Union, while fortified/closed borders are associated with control and security of nation-states, as US President Donald Trump's desire for a wall to Mexico illustrates (see BBC, 2017). This dichotomy, however, has been challenged by scholars who argued that it remains informed by ideal types of limited empirical relevance. For example, it was argued in political science scholarship that building walls has not only failed to improve national security but also made migration journeys more dangerous (Brown, 2010). Furthermore, scholars have argued that border areas across the globe resemble the realities of the 'paradox' of the contemporary globalised world of a 'simultaneous opening and blocking' of borders (Brown, 2010, p. 20). And while a borderless world is a myth or political utopia (Mau, 2023), the conviction that closing borders is not only possible but also desirable and effective, is advanced by politicians across the globe.

Yet, as we argue in this paper, most borders worldwide rather fall into the category of porous borders. We further argue that we need to distinguish between open, porous and closed borders. We consider a border to be open when national governments that share a border legally regulate but *not* prohibit the movement of humans and goods across the border. Currently, no such open international border exists, as states prohibit the movement of at least some types of goods, for example of illicitly used drugs or weapons (Simmons, 2019, p. 274).[2] We consider a border to be closed when at least one of the two states prohibits the free movement of all people and all goods across the border, e.g., to limit undesired movement of migrants/refugees. We consider a border to be porous when governments' policies are to regulate or prohibit movement of humans and goods across borders, but these policies are not fully enforced. Closed borders thus are often ideal types that diverge from what can be observed empirically. Attempts of governments to

seal off their borders do not prevent people from crossing those borders (Brown, 2010). Rather, these attempts create a paradoxical situation of sovereignty (Mills, 1996, p. 78). Closing national borders can increase 'unwanted' cross-border migration – which becomes more dangerous than legalised border crossings in a scenario of open borders – instead of halting it (Vezzoli, 2021).

In practice, as no open border exists and, to our knowledge, no state is able to fully enforce regulations or prohibitions at their border, all international borders are somewhat porous. There are, however, different degrees of porosity. In this article we conceptually illuminate borders with high degrees of porosity. The degree of porosity of borders, and therefore states' inability to completely secure their national territory by closing borders can be influenced by several factors. These include topographical challenges such as mountains and forests that make border control difficult, especially for governments with limited state capacity to patrol the borders. Selective permeability due to corruption or collusion is another influencing factor.

For the Americas, the dichotomy of open versus closed borders that we find in political debates, for instance on the US-Mexico border, has been rectified to some extent. Kacowicz et al. (2020), for instance, argue that supposedly peaceful and open borders are much more than just corridors of mobility, but have, in the Americas, also benefited illicit cross-border economic activities. Their argument, however, remains informed by an understanding of peaceful borderlands based on a traditional inter-state security perspective. They approach borderlands as spaces 'lacking governance', and consider them as characterised by openness. Such work does not explain the consolidation of hybrid sovereignties at the state's margins – and the role border porosity plays in its perpetuation – in borderlands as the ones we are concerned with in this article. Even in the context of states' selective absence a certain degree of governance is present: often, we find complex non-state orders where violent non-state actors act as the de facto authorities. At times, state and non-state actors also coproduce security at the border, sharing a task that is considered crucial for state sovereignty. This is certainly not only the case in the Americas. The South Sudanese state, for instance, outsourced border security to a non-state armed group, which led to a situation of 'security pluralism' (Schomerus & De Vries, 2014, p. 280). In Myanmar, members of armed ethnic groups formed the Border Guard Forces, military units responsible for border security and maintaining control in frontier areas that became integrated into a government-recognised military structure yet often still act independently (Clapp & Tower, 2022).

The degree of porosity of borders evolves over time, yielding new forms of governance along and across the border (Goodhand, 2005, p. 210). It also varies, depending on the type of goods or group of humans that crosses the border (Goodhand, 2005, p. 211; Idler, 2019, p. 72; Van Schendel & De Maaker, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, we can approach borders as entities possessing agency in their own right (Idler, 2019, p. 79). The border, for example, allows violent entrepreneurs to engage in violence on one side of it yet subsequently cross the border to the other side to evade prosecution. Indeed, violent non-state actors undermine national sovereignty by making strategic use of transnational spaces and the porosity of borders (Idler, 2019, p. 2). The geography of borderlands thus facilitates non-state governance not just at the local level, but in entire transnational regions.

When governments consider cross-border mobility a potential threat to security, they may try to close their borders. Even at highly fortified borders, such as the Berlin Wall or the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea, some people still managed to cross the border, thus, a certain element of porosity remains. Especially in the context of less fortified borders, border closures do not stop the flow of people, they divert them: people suffering from humanitarian crisis, war, violence, political instability and economic plight often still have to cross international borders via informal crossings. In the context of states' selective absence and non-state order where violent non-state actors act as the de facto authorities, as along parts of the Colombia–Venezuela border (HRW, 2020), these groups control territory that adjoins or is traversed by

an international borderline affected by that regime, including these informal border crossings. Attempts to seal off borders not only limit legal options of mobility, they also function as 'subtractive biopolitics' (Aradau & Tazzioli, 2020, p. 216), making crossing borders more dangerous.

Porous borders can further also empower actors seeking to bypass state authority. This does not only include, for instance, closely connected indigenous communities that are divided by international borders (Idler & McGill, 2024); it can also be the case for violent non-state actors (including people smugglers, organised criminals, paramilitaries and insurgents) and corrupt state officials. It is particularly the latter case that calls into question the widespread assumption advanced by law-and-order politicians that tough border control enhances national security. Below we illustrate how strict border control policies under conditions of border porosity provide opportunities for violent non-state actors and the detrimental security effects this may have. In order to do so, we draw on the case of Colombia's borderlands that reveals opportunity structures and adaptation when criminal groups and conflict actors – at times with corrupt state officials – victimise migrants while crossing informal border crossings (or *trochas* as they are called in Colombia) and exploit new markets during periods of border closure (Idler & Hochmüller, 2020). We further find support for our argument in existing research, including our own,[3] that shows how border closures leave illicit economies unaffected or provide criminal groups with new opportunities (e.g., Getmansky et al., 2019).

3. HYBRID SOVEREIGNTY: ON THE MATERIALITY AND INFLUENCE OF POROUS BORDERS

3.1. Sovereignty

We contend that porous borders facilitate the consolidation of hybrid sovereignty. In order to advance our argument, we start by clarifying how we understand sovereignty. We first discuss the 'classic' definitions found in IR debates on state sovereignty which then help us unbundle the new, hybrid forms of sovereignty we are concerned with. Krasner (1999) for example, identifies four sovereignty dimensions: 'international legal sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, and interdependence sovereignty'. For our argument, the second to fourth dimensions are crucial. Krasner defines them as follows:

> *Westphalian sovereignty* refers to political organization based on the exclusion of external actors from authority structures within a given territory. *Domestic sovereignty* refers to the formal organization of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within borders of their own polity. Finally, *interdependence sovereignty* refers to the ability of public authorities to regulate the flow of information, ideas, goods, people, pollutants, or capital across the borders of their state (Krasner, 1999, pp. 3–4; emphases added).

While full-fledged state sovereignty is an ideal type, ambiguous rules originating in arrangements among actors ranging from private corporate figures to transnational criminal organisations and terrorist groups increasingly put state sovereignty in the post-Cold War world under pressure (Sassen, 2018, pp. 12–13). We can observe similar tendencies of ambiguous orders in conflict zones and other areas where state governance is contested or complemented by violent non-state actors. Examples of such orders include those imposed by ethnic armed organisations in Myanmar, by the Islamic State in the Middle East, or by Boko Haram in Nigeria (see Brenner, 2015; Foyou et al., 2018; Mironova, 2019). In these cases, violent-non-state actors exert control across borders, thus contradicting the border-reinforcing function of state sovereignty. Beyond these definitions that focus on the authority to govern a specific territory, sovereignty – in a more Schmittian tradition of political thought – is understood as the power 'over life and

death' (Das & Poole, 2004, p. 25), because actions of the state are, at the same time, rooted in and located beyond the law.

3.2. Hybridity

Since the late 2000s, the conflict, security and peacebuilding literatures have used the concept of hybridity to describe the political orders emerging during and after conflict and war, built by local/international and liberal/illiberal actors and ideas (Mac Ginty, 2010). This allowed scholars to acknowledge the possibility of multiple types of orders in which states would be sharing the provision of governance and authority with non-state actors (Albrecht & Moe, 2015, p. 3, 15–16).

This literature also acknowledges that in many regions of the world, the state does not possess the monopoly on violence. This is particularly visible in scholarship on 'hybrid violence' (Krause, 2012), for instance in the context of rebel (Arjona, 2016) or criminal governance (Mantilla & Feldmann, 2021), which can be approached as social orders to which both state and violent non-state actors can contribute. These non-state actors can include rebel, paramilitary, organised criminal groups and militias (Arias et al., 2022).

These new modes of order that transcend the Weberian ideal type have implications for our understanding of sovereignty. Sovereignty not only changes through the types of actors involved, but also the methods used by them to fight over the provision of order. In the broader sense, the concept 'sovereignty' refers to a 'supreme authority within a territory' (Davis, 2020, p. 207; Philpott, 1995), which does not necessarily have be the authority of the state (see also Idler & Voyvodic, 2025). As Arias et al. (2022, n.p.; original emphasis) argue, 'authority refers to rule-making in the territorial, economic, and social realm that can be exercised by a single actor, such as a state, but it can also be shared by multiple actors, which then gives rise to *hybrid* sovereignties' (see also Fregonese, 2012). Similarly, Srivastava (2022) approaches hybrid sovereignty through the lens of shifting constellations of public and private actors on the global political level. In the next section, we zoom into the emergence and reproduction of these forms of hybrid sovereignty and the governance constellations that they are built upon.

3.3. Complementary governance

Under conditions of hybrid sovereignty, several actors compete but also often engage in complementary governance. We follow Idler and Forest (2015) who understand complementary governance as arrangements among violent non-state actors established to facilitate collaboration or tacit non-interference to provide public goods to the population of the territory in which they exercise authority. Such governance arrangements include, for example, transactional supply chain relationships, strategic alliances and pacific coexistence. They can also include state actors (Idler, 2012). Furthermore, complementary governance can, apart from the setting of rules and norms and the provision of goods and services, also involve a division of labour between state and non-state actors of mobility control (see, for instance, the cases of forced displacement in contexts of internal armed conflict such as Colombia, Steele, 2017) as well as the governance of life and death (see, for instance, in the case of collusion between state authorities and violent non-state actors in Venezuela, Smilde et al., 2023).

Latin America features many regions where complementary governance between state and non-state actors exists. Arias and Goldstein's (2010) work demonstrates that many of the subcontinent's political orders are based on 'violent pluralism'. As Latin American governments' sovereignty is often only titular (Arias, 2010, p. 249), the state monopoly of coercion is challenged or, at times, with consent of the state, even strategically expanded towards violent non-state actors. Sovereignty then is co-produced between public authorities and non-state actors, ranging from indigenous communities in Guatemala (Sieder, 2011) to criminal organisations in Brazil (Denyer Willis, 2015).

Having discussed the notion of porous borders and unpacked the concepts of sovereignty, hybridity and complementary governance, we now move to applying the porosity lens to the case of the Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands to explain the role of the border's porosity for the emergence and reproduction of hybrid sovereignties in that region.

4. POROSITY AND HYBRID SOVEREIGNTIES AT THE COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA BORDER

The 1378 miles-long Colombia–Venezuela border has been historically contested and a site of organised violence carried out by a multitude of violent non-state groups. The border population has often felt marginalised or abandoned by the state, which has allowed violent non-state groups to challenge state authority (Idler, 2019). This becomes apparent when considering who controls the border. At the time of writing this article, there were only seven official border crossings. Beyond that, rebel, criminal and (post-)paramilitary groups, often in collaboration with corrupt state officials, control the numerous *trochas* along a complex terrain that ranges from deserts to riverbeds and from jungles to mountain ranges. These geographical conditions contribute to the porosity of the Colombia–Venezuela border, a context in which hybrid sovereignties emerge and reproduce.

In order to discuss the ways border porosity facilitates the emergence of hybrid sovereignties, we draw mainly on the case of the ELN guerrilla group, and their collusion and/or competition with state security forces on both sides of the border. After the Colombian government had signed a Peace Agreement in 2016 with the insurgents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP), the ELN became Colombia's largest insurgent group. Like the FARC-EP, the ELN has been expanding its realm of action beyond Colombia's borders for decades. This has included building a stronghold in the Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands. Not limited to national territory, and benefiting from the porosity of the border, the ELN is thus a transnationally operating insurgent group with strong ties to drug trafficking, illegal mining, kidnapping for ransom and extortion. It has been controlling communities and governance functions as the de facto authority in the department of Arauca in Colombia, as well as the state of Apure on the Venezuelan side of the border (Idler & Forest, 2015).

4.1. Borderlands and the border effect

Borders are infrastructures that possess an own biography and that national governments strategically mobilise; borders shape their environment and the ways social and political orders are constituted and reproduced by materialising, dematerialising and rematerialising (Megoran, 2012, p. 477). Such a perspective allows assessing how states politically imagine and discursively construct borders and borderlands, and why – and to what extent – walls, fences, checkpoints and other more fluid forms of border control have become key state 'infrastructures' representing the state's claims of sovereignty (Sur, 2021, p. 9) that does, however, often fail to materialise as we show in the remainder of this section. In order to do so, we will unpack the notion of porosity of the border between Colombia and Venezuela. While national governments focus on how to reinforce the border that separates two national sovereign territories from each other, understanding porosity's repercussions requires analysing the environment in which this border is embedded, namely, transnational borderlands. We therefore bring the above-mentioned approaches into dialogue with analytical perspectives that acknowledge the agency of borders, such as Idler's (2019) theorisation of the border effect.

Following Idler's work, we conceptualise borderlands as a transnational unit of analysis, straddling both sides of an international border. This approach, which helps explain the transnational dimension of new modes of sovereignty (Davis, 2010, pp. 402–405), makes sense particularly in areas where colonial borderlines separated (ethnic) communities. Idler defines the border effect as

the confluence of weak state governance, a propensity for impunity and an environment of low-risk and high-opportunity in regions where state capacities are weak. This border effect thus turns international borders into a filter mechanism: where formal, state-related actors such as local authorities and their activities like law enforcement may face obstacles in crossing the border, informal, non-state dynamics cross the border continuously.

To make sense of borders' role – or agency – in facilitating hybrid sovereignty, we first draw on research that has shifted analytical attention towards the *material* dimension of borders (e.g., Dijstelbloem, 2021; Mau et al., 2021) and then discuss the *temporal*, *processual* and *relational* dimension of borders. We show that the border between Colombia and Venezuela possesses agency in structuring the social and political life in borderlands (Idler, 2019, p. 79) and facilitates illicit flows of goods (Hochmüller, 2022) as well as the emergence of hybrid sovereignties.

4.2. Ecologies of porous borders: material and temporal conditions facilitating hybrid sovereignties

A first factor that explains the porosity of borders is their *material condition*. At highly porous borders, we would usually find a limited number of formal border crossings occupied by customs and border control officials, while most of the borderline is perforated by informal border crossings. These can take shape as trails, bridges or less visible forms such as riverbeds. Furthermore, porous borders are shaped by distinct ecologies that can deepen their porosity further, for example in remote, hardly accessible geographic margins of states that do not possess a monopoly on violence in these regions. The lack of infrastructure such as roads and the limited presence of state institutions that make these regions prone to instability also facilitate porosity: if jungle areas or mountain ranges impede constructing state-controlled infrastructure, these very ecological features also help non-state actors expand their authority across these borders. This is the case with the Serranía de Perijá, a mountain range shared by the Colombian department of Cesar and the Venezuelan state of Zulia, or with jungle areas in the Amazonas. It also concerns the desert peninsula of Guajira shared by Colombia and Venezuela. Often, the very location of the borderline is contested. Changing riverbeds, rough mountainous or desert terrain, or dense jungle area can make it difficult to determine where one state's territory ends and the neighbouring state's territory begins. Fortified borders seeking to limit cross-border mobility effectively thus only apply to those locations where there is someone who can 'restrict': formal border crossings with the presence of state officials. The major part of the border needs to be treated differently – not just as 'not restrictive', but also as catalysing the negative security repercussions that the restrictive border regimes intend to avert.

An 'open versus closed' perspective that ignores porosity risks oversimplifying the challenges inherent in borders – in particular when connected to imaginaries of open borders as insecure and closed borders as secure in terms of national security – which tends to (re)produce securitised imaginaries of the unruly borderlands and weak border policies. Okolie-Osemene and Aluko (2019, pp. 64–65), for example, who study the relation between porous borders and counterinsurgency campaigns in Nigeria, frame open borders as a potential threat to state security and porous borders to facilitate counterinsurgency operations in borderlands that they understand as 'ungoverned spaces' (Okolie-Osemene & Aluko, 2019, p. 69). Such perspectives can translate into strategies of border fortification and securitisation (Ybarra, 2016, p. 196), often accompanied by attempts to limit human cross-border mobility. Perspectives on unruliness or ungovernability impede a more thorough analytical engagement with these border spaces that hold challenges often reinforced by national security responses.

Common definitions of porosity concerned with international borders tend to focus on the materiality of a 'separator' such as a wall or a membrane.[4] We have seen they take a broad variety of shapes and forms at the Colombia–Venezuela border. There is also a *temporal, processual* and *relational* dimension – the second condition of a porous border that we discuss in this section –

that contributes to a border's porosity, as discussed in cultural and urban studies scholarship. 'Porosity, if only as a beginning', Andrew Benjamin remarked in his analysis of Walter Benjamin's famous essay on the Italian city of Naples, 'provides a way of making space and time work together to define both the urban condition and the body's place within it' (Benjamin, 2007, p. 109). Given the intertwining of these entities, porosity also works as a connector, and that has been reflected from positions that stressed the 'interpenetration', 'permeability' and the condition of 'in-between space' (Wolfrum, 2018, p. 17). Recent studies on the urban condition also adopt such a perspective (e.g., Cebir Meral & Özsoy, 2021). Porosity is thus a *process* that is always in the making (Benjamin, 2007, p. 113).

This notion of porosity's *temporality* and *processual* character speaks to the concept of hybrid sovereignty, which emphasises a similarity of authorities and blurred forms of authority (Albrecht & Moe, 2015). Weaving together the approaches of hybrid sovereignty and porous borders allows us to move beyond static, Westphalian or Weberian concepts of sovereignty, as discussed above, towards a more empirically grounded and relational notion of sovereignty (Stepputat, 2015, p. 141), as well as a focus on sovereignty as a practice that can involve state and non-state actors alike (Albrecht & Kyed, 2015, p. 8). In the next section, we discuss the material, temporal, processual and relational dimensions of porosity as well as the forms of complementary governance that it facilitated to emerge at the Colombia–Venezuela border (and that we observe also along other porous borders including the Myanmar-Thailand border and the Somalia-Kenya border) (see Idler et al., 2019). We argue that the border's porosity enables these forms of governance to coexist. It also allows various actors to operate simultaneously. The unique material and temporal conditions of the Colombia–Venezuela border create an environment for hybrid sovereignties to emerge and persist. This is evident in smuggling, trafficking and cross-border conflicts over territorial control.

4.3. State/non-state collusion and competition in borderlands

Colombia's border exhibits characteristics of four of the ideal border types identified by Taubenböck et al. (2023): the frontier border, abandoned and with extremely limited or absent infrastructure; the landmark border with 'little state control architecture'; the checkpoint border, particularly represented in the seven official border crossing points with Venezuela; and the barrier border with 'physical barriers such as fences and ditches … located at neuralgic border crossings' (Taubenböck et al., 2023, p. 3). To make sense of porosity's role in the reproduction of hybrid sovereignties, we adopt a perspective that brings together material with a temporal, processual and relational dimension as outlined above. Borders and border areas are not only crucial parts of the infrastructure of the modern state (Otero-Bahamon et al., 2022, p. 198; see also Dijstelbloem, 2021); they are also co-shaped by violent non-state actors. In this context, borderlands are instances of the 'margins' of a state (Das & Poole, 2004) that help shift the focus away from state sovereignty and explore the interactions and dynamics between state and non-state actors. These borders run through rivers, deserts, jungles and other complex and often contested terrain. They are hard to control, let alone to seal off. They are, furthermore, simultaneously a connector of communities grown across the borderline (see Idler & McGill, 2024) and a driver of the 'permanent territorial dispute' that characterises many regions along Colombia's borders (social leader quoted in CONPEACE, 2020).

The border's porosity turns borderland terrain into fertile ground for violent non-state actors and, eventually, hybrid forms of sovereignty across borders. Space, territory and materiality can facilitate the emergence of insurgencies and influence the course of armed conflicts: while 'rough terrain' (Daly, 2012, p. 473) can benefit rebels, it can also be detrimental to revolutionary action (Gordillo, 2023). Indeed, the contested nature of territory – and this includes borderlands – sits at the heart of the '[s]truggles over the state' (Ballvé, 2013, p. 239). While the influence of terrain and territory for the power of rebel groups may have been overestimated, the role of international

borders is more ambiguous (Daly, 2012, p. 482). This is evidenced by the account of a former Director of the Municipal Police of the border city Cúcuta in Colombia's Norte de Santander department according to whom violent non-state actors competing over territorial control erected 'invisible barriers along the border' (WRadio, 2020, n.p.). Frequent border closures did not only fail to prevent cross-border illicit activities (Parra, 2018) but shifted the power structures at the border towards violent non-state actors. As a business man in Colombia's Norte de Santander department put it, '[i]t's not a hyper-controlled border, but a border that, by closing it, the two states turn their backs [and] it is left in the hands of [armed] groups'.[5]

The border porosity allows for various governance actors, both state and non-state ones, to use distinct infrastructures, technologies and social practices in the 'grey areas of illegality and informality' (Guerrero-C, 2022, p. 104) which eventually leads to the emergence and reproduction of hybrid forms of sovereignty. In this sense, legal and illegal cross-border activities coincide in the Colombian borderlands, where rebel groups compete over the control of informal border crossings for smuggling and trafficking of both legal and illegal goods and people; these routes often run through rivers, deserts, jungles and other terrain that is contested and complex to control. Borders remain porous regardless of 'the sheer force of state violence, deadly ecologies, and incursive infrastructures' (Sur, 2021, p. 7). The porous nature of the border also shapes how populations act across borderlines and how this contributes to challenges to the respective state's strengthening or weakening of its territorial control (Sur, 2021). Smugglers reproduce this mutually constitutive relationship between border communities and the state because they replicate the state and its effect on border populations through border control (Galemba, 2022, pp. 62–63). As a local resident and trader of the Norte de Santander department explained to us in an interview, the Colombian government's attempt to close the border in 2015 triggered a crisis due to the mutual dependencies of border communities in economic terms.[6] The interviewee stressed that, '[w]ith the border closure, … half of us were left with nothing'.[7] The closure pushed smugglers from the bridges and streets that they tended to use for their illicit businesses to the so-called *trochas,* that is, the informal border crossings: 'Well, […] the first months were traumatic because there was no way to [survive economically], you know … but then the strategy was created through the *trochas* and that went on for two, three years'.[8] This situation made smugglers more dependent on using routes controlled by armed groups. Eventually, around 2014, Venezuela's fuel production declined massively, which put many gasoline smugglers out of business.

In unstable borderlands – like in other marginal areas of the state – conditions of 'pluralization of regulation' enable new structures that transcend the dichotomy between state and non-state actors (Das & Poole, 2004, p. 20). Borders have, in this context, also a non-material (or theatrical, as some authors would put it) effect, as they (re)produce sovereignty and security (Amoore & Hall, 2010, p. 301). We therefore must integrate these 'material and ideational' dimensions of borders, particularly their role as 'mediators' that shape the 'entities and events in between them' '(Dijstelbloem, 2021, p. 9). This way, we can shift analytically from the state's view on sovereignty towards complementary governance constellations that include non-state actors (Goodhand, 2005, p. 210). A focus on illicit actors and supply chains as the one suggested by Yashar for 'territorial enclaves' more broadly allows us to understand that, rather than being ungoverned, contested border spaces exhibit a specific form of governance with state and violent non-state actors contending over control (Yashar, 2018, pp. 358–359). This then explains the situation at the Colombia–Venezuela border: here, border porosity provides violent non-state actors with illicit opportunities, undermining the state's historically limited claim to the legitimate monopoly on violence and facilitating the emergence of hybrid sovereignties. There is, however, also a collusion between (corrupt) elements of the state security forces on both sides of the border, in particular when it comes to the 'big smuggling mafias' that consist of state and non-state actors and that are visible in the 'great number of police and army checkpoints'

that allow trucks with contraband gasoline to pass the borderline, as a Cúcuta resident stated in 2022.[9]

Borders are not only key in shaping the relations between the states that share the border (Ullah & Kumpoh, 2018, p. 311); their porous condition in the case we have discussed here is also influencing the emergence of hybrid sovereignty that can include violent non-state actors. In the Colombia–Venezuela case, Colombian left-wing insurgent groups have, since the early days of the socialist regime that came into power in 1998 with the election of then President Hugo Chávez, sought temporal refuge on the Venezuelan side of the borderline. This was done to avoid prosecution and arrange their operations. In the Colombia–Venezuela borderlands, guerrilla groups such as the ELN have occasionally also colluded with officials of the Venezuelan state security forces, while other Colombian violent non-state actors have engaged in fights with them. In March 2022, a joint campaign of the Venezuelan security forces and the ELN was reported (Acosta, 2022). In this campaign with the Venezuelan security forces, the ELN attacked FARC-EP dissidents that had remobilised and that had been a thorn in the side of both the Venezuelan state and the ELN. According to Human Rights Watch, '[t]he operations have been carried out along the porous border between the countries, which divides the Colombian province [*sic*] of Arauca from the Venezuelan state of Apure' (Acosta, 2022, n.p.).

This example shows sovereignty's multiple layers in these unstable borderlands that make borders a key component of violent non-state actors' 'mobility corridors' (Otero-Bahamon et al., 2022, p. 199). Thus, the border's material and geographical features are not only relevant to those who compete with the state but also to those who spend their everyday lives in these surroundings (Nyman, 2021, p. 314).

4.4. Border closures as catalysers of hybrid sovereignties

Border closures (that, despite their intent, left borders porous rather than sealed off) in the Colombian borderlands have often destabilised illegal markets and, at the same time, increased the illegal border crossings' profitability. They further 'paved the way for the configuration of both an informal sphere of control of transnational migratory flows and an expanded portfolio of illegal and legal markets' (García Pinzón & Mantilla, 2021, p. 274), turning criminal groups into border authorities (García Pinzón & Mantilla, 2021, pp. 272–275).

As an advisor of the Colombian Presidential Office's Border Unit reported in 2020, during an official border closure the institutional border control presence increased but the border's geographical extension hindered covering the entire territory.[10] In this context, the border city Cúcuta has seen the most violent month in May 2020 for four years, arguably due to increased economic pressures on violent non-state actors. As drug trafficking decreased due to a shortage of required resources such hydrochloride to produce coca paste, this advisor reported, violent non-state actors diversified their illicit activities. For instance, they shifted towards illegal mining, taxing the informal border crossings and social control. Furthermore, territorial disputes between these groups intensified.[11] As a Colombian trader familiar with cross-border smuggling described in an interview we conducted in Cúcuta in 2022, goods and people needed to cross a multilayered informal border system with Venezuelan national guard, army, guerrilla groups and (more rarely) Colombian police demanding the payment of a fee at various checkpoints operated by state and non-state actors: 'they charged you a minimum of one thousand pesos for the first two or three points and at the last point they charged you two thousand pesos. A total of five thousand pesos just to pass through'.[12]

The formally closed borders and the concomitant charging of fees also became an economic interest that a local trader described as 'the most feasible business on the border with Colombia'. Consequently, he speculated that 'rumour has it that [the border] has not been opened … through the bridges because it would put an end to the work on the *trochas*'.[13] During border closures, the grip of armed groups became tighter, and the smugglers knew that those controlling

the border were the armed groups that acted as the de facto sovereigns. As the Colombian trader from Cúcuta we interviewed put it:

> If you don't know how to answer [if asked by an armed group about your business], you will probably be deprived of your freedom for a few days until they extract the information from you to confirm what you are doing or that you are not part of the team of the illegal armed forces here, you will understand that here the paramilitaries are in charge and over there the guerrillas. They have a war going on between them, so until they investigate you, until they know that you are not really an informant, a spy or something like that, they are not going to accept you.[14]

As this section demonstrated, violent non-state actors can act as the de facto sovereign at the border in the context of border porosity. They govern either in concert with the state – for instance by splitting up the *trochas* to 'tax' smugglers and traffickers – or against it when building infrastructure or imposing a given social order to entire villages under their rule while keeping the state authorities at arm's length. Porous borders are conducive to these forms of hybrid sovereignty, as they not only strengthen these non-state actors, but also erode the state at its margins – yet with security implications that reach the state's very centre (Idler & Hochmüller, 2024; Mantilla, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

We have shown how the porosity of borders catalyses and solidifies hybrid sovereignties through promoting complementary forms of governance. While hybrid sovereignties have received heightened scholarly attention over the past decade, this article systematically engages with both the human and the material condition of unstable borderlands. In these scenarios, state and non-state actors engage in various forms of complementary governance, facilitated by the porosity of the border, which is the consequence of a particular ecology that makes the 'walling off' of states almost impossible while, at the same time, making complementary governance more likely. In these territories, the state and violent non-state actors compete against or complement each other in the provision of public goods, the regulation of the circulation of goods and people, and, ultimately, the governance of life and death. Building on work that shows how borders facilitate establishing complementary governance (e.g., Arias et al., 2022), we have demonstrated how porosity helps us understand these dynamics.

This has implications for how IR scholarship has traditionally understood sovereignty, as through the four dimensions identified by Krasner (1999). In the type of borderlands we focus on – characterised by highly porous international borders – at least three of the four dimensions he established are contested: First, external actors, such as transnationally operating drug trafficking organisations, are not effectively excluded from national territory. Second, the state is not effective in exercising full control in these areas. Third, the state's ability to regulate cross-border flows, both material and ideational, is limited. Consequently, unstable borderlands marked by a porous borderline represent areas where struggle over the claim to govern takes place and new modes of sovereignty emerge (see Davis & Müller, 2025). Put differently, these borderlands are sites where the state does not monopolise violence and where the cross-border flows of people or (illicit) goods facilitate the emergence of hybrid forms of sovereignty, in which state and violent non-state actors form strategic short- or long-term arrangements (for a discussion of violent non-state actors' cooperation across ideological boundaries, see Idler, 2020).

In borderlands, the notion of state territoriality is thus challenged and fragmented by embedding illicit sovereignties into licit sovereignties that, however, often lack the legitimacy and are therefore eroded. Not only can such fragmented sovereignty 'undermine national state-based sovereignties in the developing world' (Davis, 2010, p. 400); it also produces new modes of

sovereignty beyond the state. However, hybrid sovereignties are not always a direct threat to the state's authority, as criminal actors, for instance, are not trying to topple the national government or implement a new political regime (see also, Davis, 2009, p. 222).

To take these insights forward, we suggest three further avenues of research. First, we propose comparing to what extent contested sovereignties play out differently in border areas than in more centrally located regions, the so-called heartlands. Hybrid sovereignties in borderlands emerge at the frontier between different juridical sovereignties. They thus differ from those that appear in localities overseen by a single juridical (state) sovereignty in that they generate somewhat different order and governance dynamics. What exactly these differences are requires further scholarly attention. Second, we propose addressing the question of how 'border games' (Andreas, 2009) are played in a context of contested sovereignty: Who are the players? What are the rules of the game? To what extent does the material dimension of the border(land) itself influence the game and, ultimately, the constellation of players? Shifting the focus from the game to the players can offer insights regarding the interplay of the agency of the border itself as well as those who benefit from it. Finally, we suggest using this work as a starting point to rethink territorial sovereignty. As we have shown, hybridity is not confined by state borders. In regions where state authority weakens towards the geographic peripheries, hybrid sovereignties extend beyond borders and governance operates transnationally, challenging Weberian notions of territorial sovereignty. It remains to be seen whether this trend will continue, challenging our understanding of the state, or if the state is already making a comeback, as suggested by the hardening of borders in other parts of the world. Most likely, these will continue to be two parallel trends, thus making sustained scholarly attention to these matters crucial to grasp the heightened complexity of state borders.

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NOTES

1. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/un-committee-urges-prompt-investigation-deaths-migrants-moroccan-spanish (Accessed 8 July 2022).
2. Border regulation is typically selective. Shachar (2020) highlights this by pointing to the differences in border regimes that discriminate between rich/welcome migrants on the one hand, and poor/undesired migrants on the other hand (see also Mau, 2023).
3. We draw on interviews conducted in the Colombian border town Cúcuta in 2022 and remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a survey conducted with representatives of the Colombian government, civil society and the international community in 2020 and 2021.
4. See, for instance, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/porous (Accessed 7 July 2022).
5. Remote interview with businessman, Cúcuta, 1 July 2021.
6. Interview with Cúcuta resident, Cúcuta, 3 August 2022.
7. Interview with Cúcuta resident, Cúcuta, 3 August 2022.
8. Interview with Cúcuta resident, Cúcuta, 3 August 2022.
9. Interview with Cúcuta resident, Cúcuta, 3 August 2022.
10. CONPEACE, COVID-19 survey, July 2020.
11. CONPEACE, COVID-19 survey, July 2020.
12. Interview with Colombian trader, Cúcuta, 4 August 2022.
13. Interview with Colombian trader, Cúcuta, 4 August 2022.
14. Interview with Colombian trader, Cúcuta, 4 August 2022.

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