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Diaspora Engagement Policies as Global Nation-Building: The *Karta Polaka* in the Global Political Order

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This article conceptualises diaspora engagement policies as a form of global nation-building. While existing research has produced numerous typologies explaining why states engage their diasporas, it has paid limited attention to how such policies relate to the structural principles of the global political order. Addressing 3 analytical blind spots – the neglect of structural commonalities among policy types, the lack of attention to their relationship with the nation-state form and the omission of accidental diasporas – the article advances a theoretical framework that links diaspora engagement to the global principle of organising political communities. Using Poland's Karta Polaka *as a heuristic device, the article demonstrates how states seek to re-establish the ideal-type congruence between citizenship, territory and national belonging beyond their territorial and citizenship boundaries. Rather than eroding sovereignty, these policies illustrate the adaptive resilience of the nation-state form under conditions of globalisation. Framing diaspora engagement as global nation-building thus reveals how nation-states continue to reproduce and legitimise themselves as central actors of world politics through transborder practices of inclusion and belonging.*

Keywords: diaspora engagement, global nation-building, nation-state form, Poland, Karta Polaka*, sovereignty*

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Introduction

State–diaspora relations increasingly gain traction in international politics. During the past 3 decades, an ever-growing number of states worldwide maintain relations with their diaspora communities abroad and pursue specific policies of diaspora engagement. Today, we find examples of such 'diaspora engagement policies' (Gamlen 2006) in the majority of the United Nations member states, spanning from Albania to Zimbabwe (Gamlen, Cummings and Vaaler 2019). International organisations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2021), the World Bank (Kuznetsov 2006), the European Commission for Democracy through Law, the so-called Venice Commission (Venice Commission 2001) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (McLean 2024) have also recognised the growing importance of state–diaspora relations and developed recommendations and guidelines for the diaspora engagement of nation-states. In other words, diaspora engagement policies have become not only an 'increasingly normal' (Délano and Gamlen 2014: 47) but also 'a genuinely *global*' phenomenon (Sendhardt 2021: 25).

Diaspora engagement policies are usually origin-state-driven efforts aiming to acknowledge diaspora communities as a fundamental element of the 'global nation' (Smith 2003: 726) and to formalise these transborder relations.[1] The specifics of these 'global nation policies' (Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003: 588) vary greatly and may include language and other educational programmes for the diaspora in their states of residence, support for media outlets in the language of the diaspora, state-run and public television as well as radio broadcasting, national holidays honouring the diaspora, the organisation of congresses, the extension of rights and privileges typically reserved for citizens (and legal long-term residents), as well as repatriation and return laws and the establishment of 'diaspora institutions', which are 'formal offices of state dedicated to emigrants and their descendants' (Gamlen 2014: 184; see also Ragazzi 2014: 75).

Specifically in the fields of political science and international relations (IR), the issue of how diaspora engagement policies intersect with core principles of the global political order has emerged as a recurring theme (Adamson and Demetriou 2007; Adamson and Han 2024; Aksel 2022; Délano 2014; Délano and Gamlen 2014; Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003, 2017; Ragazzi 2009, 2017; Sendhardt 2021). This line of inquiry focuses on the ways in which such relations 'are re-inventing the role of states outside of territorial boundaries and in this way reconfiguring traditional understandings of sovereignty, nation and citizenship' (Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003: 606) and, more broadly, calling into question 'the Westphalian configuration' of international relations (Ragazzi 2009: 380). At a more granular level, this line of research explores how state–diaspora relations in general – and diaspora engagement policies, in particular – intersect with 'the nation-state form as a model for organising political communities' (Sendhardt 2021: 26). Notably, international relations scholarship has underscored a tension at the heart of these policies, suggesting that they often embody a 'paradoxical nature' (Brand 2006: 26; Sendhardt 2021; Varadarajan 2010: 7):

> *On the one hand, by extending rights and privileges beyond the boundaries of territory and, at times, citizenship, these policies reflect a form of transborder nationalism that appears to be undermining basic aspects of national sovereignty and the nation-state model itself. On the other hand, however, by addressing diasporas as constitutive elements of the nation, these policies reflect a form of 'transsovereign nationalism' (Csergo and Goldgeier 2004: 26) which is (re-)emphasising the nation as an 'imagined political community' (Anderson 2006: 6), thus reaffirming the nation-state form* (Sendhardt 2021: 26).

A specific instance of these developments is found in Central and Eastern Europe, where the Revolutions of 1989, the Autumn of Nations, brought about not only the fall of Communism but also a revival of national identities in the region, along with a reawakening of diaspora communities (Kruszewski 1996). A particularly instructive example is the case of Poland, as it covers the entirety of the aforementioned types of diaspora engagement policies. The Polish state engages with its diaspora, the *Polonia*, through educational programmes furthering knowledge about Polish culture as well as language proficiency, the support of Polish-language media in the diaspora's states of residence, the television channel *TVP Polonia* and the broadcasting station Radio Poland. It honours the diaspora on the National Day of the *Polonia* and Poles Abroad (*Dzień Polonii i Polaków za Granicą*) – commemorated each year on 2 May – and organises congresses in cooperation with the Association 'Polish Community' (*Stowarzyszenie 'Wspólnota Polska'*), a non-governmental organisation operating under the patronage of the Senate – the upper chamber of the Polish parliament. Furthermore, the Polish state engages with its diaspora through repatriation and kin-state policies based on the 2000 Act on Repatriation but also – and particularly – the 2007 Act on the *Karta Polaka*. It also engages through diaspora institutions such as the Department for Cooperation with the *Polonia* (*Departament Współpracy z Polonią*) which, since 24 March 2009, operates within the framework of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and whose name was changed to Department for Cooperation with Polish Community Abroad[2] (*Departament Współpracy z Polonią i Polakami za Granicą*) on 11 July 2012.

For the purposes of this article's central argument, the case of the Karta Polaka was selected over other ethnic cards in the region primarily because of 2 decisive legal amendments adopted in 2016 and 2019, which fundamentally transformed its scope and function. The 2016 reform entailed a qualitative deepening of the rights attached to the card by linking it to permanent residence, a fast track to Polish citizenship after 1 year of continuous residence in Poland on the basis of that permanent residence permit, and extensive state-supported integration measures, including financial assistance. In this way, the card was explicitly connected to the dimension of citizenship within the nation-state form. The 2019 amendment subsequently extended eligibility from Poles in the post-Soviet space to persons of Polish origin worldwide, irrespective of citizenship, thereby globalising the addressee base of the policy along the dimension of national belonging beyond territorial boundaries. It is precisely this reconfiguration of the ideal-typical nexus between citizenship, territory and national belonging that turns the *Karta Polaka* into a particularly suitable empirical case for analysing diaspora engagement as a form of global nation-building.

In the existing literature on state–diaspora relations (as will be discussed in more detail below), the predominant approach to conceptualising the wide range of policies in this field is to distinguish between different forms of diaspora engagement. More specifically, this line of scholarship tends to focus on developing typologies and taxonomies to explain why states seek to engage with their diasporic communities. While this strand of literature has been highly valuable in advancing our understanding of the goals and motivations behind state diaspora policies, it also contains certain blind spots that limit its conceptual scope.

This article addresses 3 such conceptual blind spots in particular. First, the focus on differences between the various types of diaspora engagement policies often obliterates their structural commonalities. Second, the focus on explanations as to *why* states engage with their diasporas tends to lose sight of questions about *how* diaspora engagement policies relate to central structural principles of the contemporary global political order. Third, the focus on the policies of sending states *vis-à-vis migrant* diasporas tends to obscure the specific case of *accidental* diaspora engagement policies.

In order to bring these blind spots into focus and shift the analytical orientation of the scholarly debate, this article introduces the concept of *global nation-building* as a novel framework for

understanding diaspora engagement policies. In this way, following a qualitative approach, the article seeks to make a conceptual-theoretical contribution to the political science and IR literature on state–diaspora relations in general and diaspora engagement policies in particular.

Developing the concept of global nation-building, illustrated by the empirical example of Polish diaspora engagement policies, I proceed as follows. After briefly introducing the Polish case of the *Karta Polaka* as a heuristic device, I review dominant typologies and taxonomies in the literature on state–diaspora relations. Then, to widen the conceptual field of vision, I identify and address 3 blind spots in this strand of literature. In the next section, I unfold the concept of global nation-building by revisiting and specifying core understandings of nation-building and the nation from a global perspective and by conceptualising the nation-state form as a key structural logic in organising political communities worldwide. Finally, I relate this reconceptualisation back to diaspora engagement policies, showing how they constitute a specific form of global nation-building.

The Polish case of the *Karta Polaka* as a heuristic device

In this article, I use the empirical example of Polish diaspora politics as a heuristic device to illustrate the conceptual argument about the intellectual benefits of conceiving of diaspora engagement policies as a form of global nation-building. Although this article primarily adopts a qualitative, theoretical-conceptual orientation, the case of Poland offers an opportunity to empirically anchor and substantiate the argument throughout.

In their modern guises, diasporas came into existence with the advent of nation-states.[3] With only a few exceptions (see, e.g., Klekowski von Koppenfels 2019), these states have subsequently tended to develop distinct diaspora engagement policies. This holds true, too, for the case of Poland. Although early instances of diaspora policies can be traced back to the period following the restoration of Polish independence in 1918 – during the interwar period in the so-called Second Republic – the full institutionalisation and diversification of Poland's diaspora engagement portfolio occurred only after the collapse of communist rule in 1989.[4]

In 1999, the Polish government sought to formulate a comprehensive response to the complex relationship between the Polish state and Poles abroad. To this end, it introduced a package of 3 legislative proposals. First, the reform aimed to revise the Polish Citizenship Act of 1962 – an act originating in the communist period – in order to enable the restoration of citizenship to those who had been deprived of it. Second, the Repatriation Act targeted members of the Polish diaspora in the Asian successor states of the Soviet Union, populations that had emerged as a result of forced deportations, particularly during the Second World War. Third, the Act on the *Karta Polaka* was directed at the broader Polish diaspora in the East – Poles who were citizens of one of the post-Soviet successor states and who, due to restrictive legal provisions in their countries of residence, could not legally acquire a second citizenship, in this case Polish citizenship, without forfeiting their existing one.

Of the 3 legislative proposals, only the Repatriation Act was adopted in 2000. However, due to the limited willingness and capacity of Polish municipalities to accept repatriates, its impact remained marginal (Grzymała-Kazłowska and Grzymała-Moszczyńska 2014). The revised Polish Citizenship Act eventually entered into force in 2012, modernising the legal framework of Polish citizenship and simplifying procedures for its restoration and acquisition by descent. By far the most significant impact on post-1989 Polish diaspora policy, however, was produced by the Act on the *Karta Polaka*, which therefore receives the greatest attention in the present article (for comprehensive overviews and analyses of the *Karta Polaka*, see Gońda and Lesińska 2022, 2025).

In 2007, Poland passed the Act on the *Karta Polaka*, a form of diaspora engagement policy, originally targeted solely at the *Poles in the East* – that is, members of the Polish diaspora who are citizens of one of the post-Soviet successor states, where dual citizenship was largely prohibited. The law formally confirmed its holders' 'belonging to the Polish nation' and granted entitlements such as waivers of visa fees, the right to work and establish a business in Poland, access to higher education and emergency healthcare services as well as free entrance to state museums and a reduced fare when using public transport in Poland. Following major amendments in 2016 and 2019, Polish lawmakers significantly expanded both the scope of addressees and the rights conferred by the *Karta Polaka*. On the one hand, the law now encompasses the global Polish diaspora in its entirety, irrespective of citizenship status. On the other hand, cardholders were granted practically immediate permanent residence permits, substantial state-supported integration assistance, and the possibility of applying for Polish citizenship after 1 year of continuous residence in Poland on the basis of a permanent residence permit obtained in connection with the possession of a *Karta Polaka*. Applicants under this facilitated procedure are required to demonstrate officially recognised Polish language proficiency (B1 level), while they are typically exempt from certain naturalisation requirements that apply in the general procedure, such as proving a stable and regular source of income or a legal title to occupy a dwelling. By 2023, the *Karta Polaka* had been granted to more than 215,000 persons of Polish origin, the vast majority of whom hold Ukrainian or Belarusian citizenship (Gońda and Lesińska 2025: 2).

The emergence of the *Poles in the East* is closely linked to the violent border shifts of the Second World War. Following the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland in 1939 and the post-war westward shift of Poland's borders, several million ethnic Poles found themselves outside the territory of the Polish state without having migrated. In post-1989 Poland, this historical experience gave rise to a powerful narrative of a 'moral obligation' of the Polish state towards these former compatriots and their descendants (see Jagielski and Pudzianowska 2008: 51). Early attempts to institutionalise this responsibility through a *Karta Polaka* were, however, blocked in the late 1990s, *inter alia* due to concerns that the envisaged privileges were incompatible with Poland's obligations as an EU candidate state. Ironically, it was precisely Poland's accession to the EU and the introduction of the Schengen regime that later prompted the adoption of the law in 2007, as new visa barriers separated the Polish minority in the East from their kin-state.

The *Karta Polaka* is part of a broader regional wave of so-called *ethnic cards* that emerged in Central and Eastern Europe around the turn of the 21st century (Gońda and Lesińska 2025). Beginning with the Slovak Expatriate Card in 1997 and followed by the Hungarian Status Law in 2001, several kin-states introduced legal instruments that confirm ethnic belonging and grant selected rights to co-ethnics residing abroad. These cards typically provide preferential access to the kin-state's territory, labour market, education and welfare systems, as well as facilitated paths toward permanent residence and, eventually, citizenship – what Bauböck (2007: 2396) has termed a form of 'external quasi-citizenship'. Initially designed to maintain cultural ties with kin-minorities and to provide symbolic and moral compensation for historical injustices caused by shifting borders and forced population displacements, ethnic cards have gradually been transformed into strategic tools of migration and demographic policy (Gońda und Lesińska 2025: 2). Over time, their scope has expanded from narrowly defined kin-minorities to increasingly encompass entire diaspora populations. The *Karta Polaka* followed this regional pattern closely: inspired by the Slovak and Hungarian precedents, it combines a logic of historical responsibility toward the *Poles in the East* with contemporary state interests in selective immigration and nation-building beyond territorial borders.

By incorporating the *Karta Polaka*, this article brings an example from the 'Global East' (Müller 2018) into the broader debate on diaspora engagement policies, which has hitherto focused predominantly on cases from the Global North and South (see Sendhardt 2021: 27). While the Global East is not a world of its own, the kin-state policies of Central and Eastern European countries constitute a distinctive variant of diaspora engagement policy. Unlike the policies of sending states aimed at emigration diasporas, kin-state laws typically target accidental diasporas (Brubaker 2000) – populations that come into existence not as a result of 'the movement of people over borders but by the movement of borders over people' (Brubaker 2010: 69). This description aptly captures the experience of Poles in the East, a diaspora shaped by border changes and forced deportations during the Second World War. In this sense, accidental diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka* differ markedly from the diaspora policies of sending states, which generally address their '*citizens* abroad' (Brand 2006; my emphasis).

What makes the *Karta Polaka* particularly noteworthy from an international relations perspective is that it extends rights and privileges to individuals who are neither citizens nor residents of Poland. In other words, the Polish state confers benefits typically reserved for its own citizens and legal residents to non-resident non-citizens, on the sole basis of their belonging to the Polish nation (Sendhardt 2017).

In the following sections of this article, I draw on Polish diaspora engagement policies in general – and the *Karta Polaka* in particular – as a heuristic device to empirically illustrate my argument that diaspora engagement policies constitute a form of global nation-building.

State of the art: How to conceive of diaspora engagement policies

In the existing literature on diaspora engagement policies, we find a dominant analytical perspective that I refer to as the *typology approach*. This approach differentiates among various forms of diaspora engagement policies, classifies them accordingly and, on this basis, develops diverse taxonomies of diaspora policies. After briefly outlining the typology approach within the literature on diaspora engagement policies, I identify 3 analytical blind spots in this stream of scholarship, which I examine in the following sections. I then propose the concept of global nation-building as an alternative framework for a more comprehensive understanding of diaspora engagement policies – one that renders these analytical blind spots visible and integrates them into an encompassing analytical perspective.

Typologies of diaspora engagement policies

Just as there is a myriad of different types of diaspora engagement policies, the attempts to typologise the various policy approaches and explain *why* states engage their diasporas are legion.

Levitt and de la Dehesa (2003), for example, distinguish between (1) ministerial or consular reforms, (2) investment policies aimed at drawing remittances from abroad, (3) the extension of political rights via dual citizenship or the right to vote from abroad, (4) the provision of state services abroad and (5) symbolic policies 'aimed at reinforcing emigrants' sense of long-term membership (2003: 589–598). Another example is Østergaard-Nielsen (2003: 4), according to whom diaspora engagement policies are developed to pursue specific state interests: first, 'to secure continuous inflow of economic resources'; second, 'to mobilise political support and control subversive political dissidence' and third, 'to promote the upward social mobility of overseas nationals'. Gamlen (2006) identifies 3 main types of diaspora engagement policies. First, 'capacity building policies, aimed at discursively producing a state-centric "transnational national society" and developing a set of corresponding state institutions'. Second, policies that are 'extending rights to the diaspora, thus playing a role that befits a legitimate sovereign'.

Third, 'policies that are extracting obligations from the diaspora, based on the premise that emigrants owe loyalty to this legitimate sovereign' (Gamlen 2006: 5–6). Another example is Ragazzi (2014: 78) who develops an 'inductive typology' of diaspora engagement policies based on 2 statistical criteria: first, 'the type of state sector "exported" to the population abroad'; second, 'the level of transnational inclusion in a system of rights'. On this basis, Ragazzi establishes 5 state ideal-types: first, 'the expatriate state'; second, 'the closed state'; third, 'the global nation-state'; fourth, 'the managed labour state'; and fifth, 'the indifferent state' (Ragazzi 2014: 80–82). Koinova and Tsourapas (2018) discern utilitarian, identity-based and governance-oriented explanations as to why states engage their diasporas. The utilitarian perspective encompasses policies engaging diasporas as a source of remittances or as a leverage to promote political agendas. The identity-based explanation perceives diasporas 'as sources of *symbolic power*' and constitutive elements of the titular nation of the state of origin. The governance perspective, eventually, focuses on the 'multiple processes and channels' through which states engage their diasporas (Koinova and Tsourapas 2018: 313). Finally, Tsourapas (2020: 137) distinguishes between *exit* policies that 'regulate aspects related to emigration from the country of origin', *overseas* policies that 'target population groups beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation state' and *return* policies that 'set processes of readmission into the country of origin'.

Three blind spots

While these typologies of states' diaspora engagement policies highlight the great diversity of approaches and explanations as to why states engage with their diasporas, they are also marked by several blind spots. First, the focus on differences between the various types of diaspora engagement policies obliterates their commonalities. Second, the focus on explanations as to *why* states engage with their diasporas tends to lose sight of questions about *how* diaspora engagement policies relate to central structural principles of the contemporary global political order. Third, the focus on the policies of sending states *vis-à-vis migrant* diasporas tends to obscure the specific case of *accidental* diaspora engagement policies.

- Blind spot I: Commonalities between different types of diaspora engagement policies

What all of the above-mentioned typologies of diaspora engagement policies share is an almost exclusive emphasis on the *differences* between distinct types of such policies. While these typological approaches undoubtedly have their analytical merits, they tend to obscure the underlying structural commonalities which, in principle, characterise all diaspora engagement policies. More precisely, virtually all diaspora policies converge in their reference to what I term *the nation-state form*.

The nation-state form constitutes a specific *institutional logic* that organises the relationship between the state and the individual through the interrelated categories of citizenship, territory and national belonging. In its ideal-typical configuration, the nation-state sustains relations with the *resident citizen,* who is deemed a member of the state's titular *nation*. As in many other instances – such as in the case of immigrants or national minorities – this ideal-typical model does not always correspond to empirical realities on the ground. Yet, it continues to structure the ways in which states imagine, categorise and govern their diasporas.

In other words, all diaspora engagement policies are structurally similar in that they simultaneously refer to and reconfigure the 3 constitutive tenets of the nation-state form: they establish a rights- and obligation-based relationship between the state and the individual (citizenship), regulate access to the

state's territory and address individuals beyond the boundaries of territory and, at times, citizenship on the basis of national belonging.

- Blind spot II: How do diaspora engagement policies relate to the contemporary global political order?

Most, if not all, of the taxonomies presented above seek to explain *why* states engage with their diasporas abroad. However, largely absent from this body of research are questions concerning *how* diaspora engagement policies relate to the central structural principles of the contemporary global political order.

The approach pursued in this article departs from a rational-choice-oriented perspective, which focuses on the motivations of individual state actors and, instead, adopts a more constructivist orientation. This shift is already evident in the transition from *why*- to *how*-questions. In conjunction with the focus on commonalities between individual diaspora engagement policies, this approach enables an analysis of the ways in which such policies reconfigure the dynamic constellations of citizenship, territory and national belonging underlying the nation-state form, thereby shaping and influencing the structural patterns of the contemporary global political order.[5]

- Blind spot III: Beyond the sending-state paradigm. The case of accidental diaspora engagement policies

The third blind spot concerns the specific case of accidental diaspora engagement policies. A common feature of the aforementioned taxonomies of diaspora engagement policies is that they focus exclusively on the policies of sending states *vis-à-vis migrant diasporas*. By migrant diasporas, I refer to individuals who reside outside the territorial boundaries of their state of origin but typically retain citizenship of that state. In contrast, *accidental diasporas* consist of *non-resident non-citizens* whose only connection to the state of origin is their national belonging.

This focus has important implications for the perspective adopted by much of the literature, particularly within political science and international relations – fields concerned with the relationship between diaspora engagement policies and the contemporary global political order. While this research analyses how diaspora policies affect national statehood, the nature and functioning of the nation-state form itself is often under-theorised and taken for granted. Consequently, the emphasis on migrant diasporas – individuals located outside the state's territory but generally still holding its citizenship – tends to foreground primarily the categories of citizenship and territory.

Research on accidental diasporas, in contrast, brings all 3 elements of the nation-state form – citizenship, territory and national belonging – into view, since the only link these populations have to their respective state of origin is their national belonging. For this reason, incoporating the literature on accidental diasporas and thus bridging the 'definitional divide' (Waterbury 2010: 132) between the literatures on migrant and accidental diasporas is particularly instructive.

Global nation-building as an alternative perspective

In order to address the 3 analytical blind spots of the existing approaches to typologising state-driven diaspora engagement policies, this article treads a different path. Rather than offering yet another taxonomy of diaspora engagement policies, this article proposes to conceive of these policies as a form

of (global) nation-building. To be sure, this article is not the first attempt to frame diaspora engagement policies in such a fashion.

State-driven diaspora engagement policies have been variously defined as a form of 'transnational nationalism' (Ang 2004), 'transsovereign nationalism' (Csergo and Goldgeier 2004: 26) and 'kin-state nationalism' (Kántor 2004: 105), thus underlining the importance of the concept of the nation in this context. Additionally, a number of scholars have interpreted state–diaspora relations in general – and diaspora engagement policies specifically – as being intimately related to processes of nation-building.

As Adamson (2016: 296; my emphasis), for example, explains:

> *Diaspora engagement policies can be viewed as an extension of earlier forms of* nation building*. Just as states have historically utilised the ideology of nationalism as a means of securing the loyalty of* populations within their borders*, they are also increasingly trying to tie the loyalties of* populations living abroad *to the state.*

In a similar vein, other scholars investigating state–diaspora relations and diaspora engagement policies have referred to these efforts as forms of 'extra-territorial nation-building' (Bauböck 2003: 707) and highlighted the role of diaporas in 'homeland nation-building' (Dickinson 2019: 260) as well as 'transborder nation-building' projects (Pogonyi 2017: 4).

What all of these, undoubtedly valuable, approaches have in common is that their notion of nation-building is largely taken for granted (for rare exceptions see, e.g., Džankić 2015). However, as I argue in this article, the concept of (global) nation-building needs to be unpacked in order to grasp its nature and functioning, its interconnections with diaspora engagement policies and its relationship to the central structural patterns and dynamics of the contemporary global political order.

Diaspora engagement policies as global nation-building

What is nation-building?

Nation-building is usually understood in one of the following 2 ways (see Mylonas 2012; Wimmer 2018). First, as a way of (external) democratic state-building operations, often after regime change and external intervention. Understood in this way, nation-building is 'a broader effort to promote political and economic reforms with the objective of transforming a society emerging from conflict into one at peace with itself and its neighbours' (Dobbins, Jones, Crane and Cole DeGrasse 2007: xvii). Historical examples of such, often US-led, nation-building efforts range from post-Second World War Germany and Japan to the failed attempts to democratise Afghanistan and Iraq at the beginning of the 21st century (Dobbins 2003).

Second, in the tradition of scholars such as Karl Deutsch (1953; see also Deutsch and Foltz 1966), Reinhard Bendix (1964) and, later, Rogers Brubaker (1996), nation-building is generally understood as a form of '[p]olitical integration and national identification' (Wimmer 2018: 1) of non-core groups (residing on the respective state's territory) into a state's titular nation. Continuing this tradition, Harris Mylonas (2012: xx) defines nation-building as 'the process through which governing elites make the boundaries of the state and the nation coincide'. In this way, Mylonas' definition of nation-building draws on Ernest Gellner's notion of nationalism as 'primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983: 1).[6] Nation-building then refers to

the never-ending process of achieving this congruence, i.e. a non-essentialist notion of nationalism understood in this tradition as a political process rather than a primordial property. To understand the concept of nation-building as such thus requires, in a first step, understanding the concept of the nation.

One of the most widely accepted definitions of 'nation' is Benedict Anderson's constructivist notion of nations as *imagined communities*. Anderson (2006: 6; my emphasis) defines the nation as 'an imagined *political* community – (…) imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'. While this definition has become canonical for understanding the nation as a socially constructed entity, its analytical limits become visible once we ask more systematically what renders this imagined community *political*.

> [The nation] *is* imagined *because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (…) In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. (…) The nation is imagined as* limited *because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. (…) It is imagined as* sovereign *because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. (…) Finally, it is imagined as a* community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship* (Anderson 2006: 6–7).

Taken together, nation-building can be understood as the process of establishing a congruence between the nation as an imagined community and its political representation (often achieved in political struggles over the precise shape of the polity) as a (nation-)state.

Nation-building as organising political communities

What is missing in both Gellner's understanding of nationalism as a political principle striving for congruence between nation and state and Anderson's notion of the nation as an imagined community is a systematic specification of how the nation and nation-building are embedded in – and draw from – the contemporary global political order. In other words, what remains underspecified is how the nation becomes a political principle for organising political communities on a global scale. In this article, I therefore seek both to specify the notion of nation-building and to reconceptualise it from a global perspective. Specifically, I am interested in how (global) nation-building translates into practices of organising political communities. In this context, diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka* are particularly instructive, because they illuminate how such policies relate to and co-structure the contemporary global political order.

While Anderson's definition of the nation as imagined, limited, sovereign and communal seems comprehensive, it ultimately fails to explain what is *political* about it. It is at this point that this article has something important to add: the nation – and, more specifically, its political operationalisation as the nation-state – as a form of organising political communities worldwide. In this context, nationalism – understood as the political logic inherent in the concept of the nation or, more precisely, nation-statehood – points to the function of the nation as both a political ideology and a source of legitimacy for (global) political order.

Building on Gellner's notion of nationalism or nation-building and specifying it, I understand nation-building as the continuous efforts made by states (as well as political and cultural elites more precisely) to (re-)establish the mythical and ideal-type congruence not only between nation and state but, more specifically, between the boundaries of the concepts of citizenship, territory and national belonging, which are underlying the nation-state form as a model for organising political communities (see Sendhardt 2021). All nation-state policies, as I argue in this article, ultimately aim to (re-)establish this ideal congruence in one way or another in order to secure their legitimacy. Diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka* are, from this point of view, a constitutive part of the nation-building project and, because they go beyond the boundaries of national territory and often also citizenship, they could aptly be referred to as global nation-building policies. Analysing diaspora engagement policies as global nation-building policies forces us to examine the ways in which these policies relate to, challenge and alter the nation-state form, understood as the ideal-type congruence of citizenship, territory and national belonging.

Evolutionarily, the nation-state has grown into a 'global archetype' (Agnew 2007: 398) and become the dominant form for structuring the global political realm, gradually ousting or marginalising other forms of political organisation such as empires, fiefdoms, city-leagues and city-states (see also Spruyt 1996). The dominance of the nation-state form as a model for organising political communities is contingent but by no means arbitrary. The idea of the nation-state, i.e. nationalism, captivates above all as 'a theory of political legitimacy' (Gellner 1983: 1). If one understands the idea of the nation-state form as a congruent unity of *citizenship*, *territory* and *national belonging*, then ideally, as a result of the almost complete coverage of the earth's surface with nation-states, every individual is included as a *national resident citizen* – and global full inclusion in the political system has been achieved, at least in theory (see Moeller 2006: 60–61).

There is no question that this diagnosis is contradicted by numerous empirical findings on the ground. More often than not, the conceptual boundaries of citizenship, territory and national belonging are far from coinciding. Examples are legion and can be found in virtually any nation-state around the world. These include migrants who reside on a given state's territory of which they are not citizens and the titular nation to which they do not belong. These include citizens of a given state living abroad as expatriates. These, too, include persons belonging to the titular nation of a state of which they are neither citizens nor territorial residents, as is the case with the addressees of diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka*.

However, the nation-state form is not a model *of* but a model *for* organising political communities on a global scale.[7] Thus, global nation-building policies aim at realigning either the realities on the ground or the theoretical model (or both) to make them fit each other by affecting at least one of the nation-state form's constitutive tenets. The exclusion from one sphere serves as a prelude for the exclusion from the remaining spheres. From this perspective, national minorities, for example, may appear 'as a foreign body in the fabric of one's own nation' (Ther 2012: 11) and the method used to remove this foreign body may consist in the renunciation of existing citizenship, restricting naturalisation or some form of ethnic cleansing such as forced deportation, forced assimilation or even genocide. Of course, this also includes attempts at defining persons as belonging to the titular nation – as was the case, for example, with Bavarians as Germans, with Alsatians being successively redefined as Germans and French or with Creole elites constituting themselves as national cores of post-colonial states (Anderson 2006; Brubaker 1994). What all these measures have in common is that they all aim at (re-)establishing the ideal congruence between citizenship, territorial residence and national belonging.

However, the process can also work the other way round, when the inclusion in one of the spheres of the nation-state form serves as a prelude for the inclusion into the other spheres. From this perspective, persons being citizens of State A but not residing on this state's territory and not belonging to this state's titular national majority usually have the right to enter this state's territory and might be even encouraged to do so. Persons being neither citizens nor residents of State A but belonging to this state's titular (ethnic) nation may be addressed by policies of repatriation or diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka*.

Either way, nation-states seem to be bound to engage in this never-ending process of achieving congruence, of global nation-building, in order to maintain their global legitimacy as nation-states. From this perspective, diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka* are part of a wider spectrum of attempts to ensure the state's role in organising political communities. Part of this are phenomena such as dual or multiple citizenship, an increasing tolerance towards multiple (collective) identities, denizenship but, of course – and foremost – the *national resident citizen*; all of these fall under the umbrella term of organising political communities. Organising political communities can thus be read as a description of 'what a state should look like and how it should act' in a global environment (Sendhardt 2021: 27). In other words, organising political communities refers to these multiple ways in which nation-states adapt to challenges posed by globalisation. This article's focus on diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka* contributes to answering the question of how states are doing this.

Phenomena such as state–diaspora relations, similar to phenomena such as denizenship, multiple citizenship and multiple collective identities, raise questions about the validity of a Westphalian notion of sovereignty based on the congruency of the concepts of citizenship, territory and national belonging. This is not to say that the Westphalian notion of sovereignty has become obsolete or has been (successfully) contradicted. Sovereignty has always been a myth, an 'organised hypocrisy' (Krasner 1999). However, what it forces the international relations researcher to do is to examine the (paradoxical) shifts in the principle of sovereignty with regards to, for example, state–diaspora relations such as in the context of the *Karta Polaka*. Because what we see is not a dissolution of the inside/outside dichotomy defining membership in political communities through the concepts of citizenship, territory and national belonging; instead, what we see is a continuous process of reconfiguring the boundaries of political communities. Not necessarily by redrawing the boundaries between states but, on a more subtle level, by continuously redrawing and reconfiguring the conceptual boundaries of citizenship, territorial residence and national belonging. Nevertheless, this grand reconfiguration does not render obsolete the principle of national sovereignty itself; rather, it indicates that nation-states are perpetually adapting to these evolutionary challenges to their Westphalian sovereignty.

The *Karta Polaka* as global nation-building in practice

Read through the lens of global nation-building, the Polish case illustrates how states seek to reconfigure the relationship between citizenship, territory and national belonging beyond their borders. Historically, the Poles in the East emerged as an accidental diaspora: they became non-resident non-citizens of Poland not by leaving the country but because Poland's borders moved over them. Their only remaining link to the Polish state was their national belonging, while both citizenship and territorial residence were located in the successor states of the Soviet Union. In terms of the nation-state form, this configuration exemplifies a marked empirical decoupling of its 3 constitutive tenets.

Broader Polish diaspora politics already address this decoupling in differentiated ways. Symbolic and cultural measures – such as the National Day of the *Polonia* and the Poles Abroad, educational programmes and support for diaspora media and organisations – primarily operate on the dimension of national belonging. They reproduce the imagination of a global Polish community that extends beyond the state's territory and citizenry. Repatriation policies and reforms of the citizenship law, in turn, create legal pathways through which selected categories of co-ethnics can (re-)align territory and citizenship by settling in Poland and (re-)acquiring Polish nationality.

The *Karta Polaka* concentrates and intensifies these dynamics. In its original 2007 design, it targeted persons of Polish origin in the post-Soviet space who were neither citizens nor residents of Poland but were recognised as belonging to the Polish nation. By granting them facilitated entry, access to the labour market, education and other entitlements, the card established a structured relationship between state and individual that closely resembles – but does not fully amount to – citizenship. Conceptually, it partially reconnects national belonging and territorial access, while leaving citizenship formally anchored in another state.

The 2016 and 2019 amendments made this (re-)connection to the nation-state form explicit. Linking the card to a permanent residence permit and a fast track to Polish citizenship after 1 year of residence in Poland on the basis of that permit turned the *Karta Polaka* into a temporal bridge from non-resident non-citizen status to full inclusion as a national resident citizen. Extending eligibility in 2019 to persons of Polish origin worldwide, irrespective of their current citizenship, globalised the addressee base of the policy and projected Polish nationhood beyond its immediate regional neighbourhood. In so doing, the Polish state mobilises the *Karta Polaka* as an instrument of global nation-building: it uses diaspora engagement to move empirically fragmented configurations of citizenship, territory and national belonging closer to the ideal-typical congruence that underpins the legitimacy of the nation-state form.

Conclusion

This article has argued that diaspora engagement policies are best understood not merely as instruments of foreign or migration policy but as constitutive practices of *global nation-building*. Moving beyond the typological focus of existing scholarship, which classifies such policies according to their aims or instruments, the article has proposed a conceptual shift: from analysing *why* states engage their diasporas to examining *how* these engagements reconfigure the core categories that sustain the nation-state form – citizenship, territory and national belonging.

Through the empirical lens of Polish diaspora politics – and particularly the *Karta Polaka* – this study has shown how global nation-building materialises in practice. By granting quasi-citizenship rights to individuals who are neither citizens nor residents of Poland, the *Karta Polaka* performs a paradoxical operation. It expands national membership beyond territorial and juridical borders yet, in so doing, reaffirms the Polish nation as an imagined political community. The policy thus embodies a transborder nationalism that challenges the Westphalian separation of domestic and international spheres while simultaneously reasserting the nation-state as the legitimate organiser of political belonging.

From a theoretical perspective, the notion of global nation-building captures this dual dynamic: the persistence of the nation-state form amid its continuous reconfiguration. The proliferation of diaspora engagement policies worldwide illustrates that globalisation has not dissolved the logic of national belonging but has, instead, prompted states to project it outwards, seeking new ways to maintain the symbolic and political congruence of their national communities. This process is neither accidental nor

temporary – it constitutes the contemporary mode through which nation-states sustain their global legitimacy.

Recognising diaspora engagement as global nation-building has several implications for international relations and political science. First, it foregrounds the constitutive, rather than derivative, role of diaspora engagement policies in shaping global order. Second, it invites comparative research into how different regional contexts – especially in the Global East and Global South – develop distinctive variants of transborder nation-statehood. Third, it reopens the question of sovereignty: not as a declining principle but as a flexible, continuously rearticulated foundation of the global political system.

In short, diaspora engagement policies such as the *Karta Polaka* are not marginal or exceptional phenomena. They represent a structural response to the enduring challenge of aligning nation and state in a globalised and continuously globalising world. Understanding them as practices of global nation-building allows us to grasp how the nation-state adapts, persists and reproduces itself within the evolving architecture of global politics.

Notes

1. Here, I follow Brubaker and Kim (2011: 22, fn. 3) in using the term 'transborder' rather than 'transnational'. While both terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, diasporas as a constitutive element of global nations reflect an 'intra-national' membership in transborder nations.
2. This is the official English-language version by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, MSZ). A more literal translation would be Department for Cooperation with the *Polonia* and Poles Abroad.
3. This emphasis on national diasporas tends to marginalise pre-nation-state diasporas such as the Jewish and the Armenian ones.
4. For Polish diaspora politics during the Second Republic, see Kicinger (2005) and Gabaccia, Hoerder and Walaszek (2007). For the period of the Polish People's Republic, see Lencznarowicz (2001) and Maszkiewicz (2017).
5. At this point, a caveat is in order. As one reviewer pointed out, this article's focus on the junction between diaspora engagement policies and the nation-state form, based on the fundamental tenets of citizenship, territory and national belonging, excludes cases of stateless diasporas such as the Kurdish, Palestinian and Roma diasporas, as well as certain forms of authoritarian state–diaspora relations. Both omissions are well justified. In this article, I investigate *state-driven* diaspora *engagement* policies, which has 2 consequences. First, because my argument centres on diaspora engagement policies enacted by states, I do not consider the case of stateless diasporas. Second, as I focus specifically on diaspora *engagement* policies, I omit practices by authoritarian states that are not aimed at *engaging* their diasporas.
6. To be sure, nationalism in this context does not mean the chauvinist ideology but the idea that nations organise in states. 'Nationalism as an organising principle *of* [my emphasis; I would argue it is a principle *for*] political communities' Mylonas (2012: 17).
7. Here, I follow Rogers Brubaker's distinction between the nation-state as a model *of* and as a model *for* political organisation. 'As an *analytical* ideal type, the nation-state is a model of political, social, and cultural organisation; as a *normative* ideal type, it is a model *for* political, social and cultural organisation. In the former sense, *nation-state* is a category of *analysis,* used to make sense of the social world. In the latter, it is a category of *practice,* a constitutive part of the social

world, a core term in the modern political lexicon, deployed in struggles to make and remake the social world' Brubaker (2010: 62).

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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